

2018

# 'Our Mission is Protest': FEMEN, Toplessness and Female Spectacle

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/11960>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/1183>

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'OUR MISSION IS PROTEST': FEMEN, TOPLESSNESS AND FEMALE SPECTACLE

BY

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A thesis submitted to Plymouth University in partial fulfilment for the  
degree of ResM in Theatre and Performance

School of Humanities and Performing Arts

October 2017

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Nanna, I owe this to you more than you'll ever know.

To Conor, thank you for putting up with me.  
I hope you already know everything else I could say.

Thank you to my supervisors Professor Roberta Mock, Dr John Matthews and Dr Parathana Purkayastha, for their patience and support through this long process.  
It is so very appreciated.

### AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of ResM has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

Publication (included as Appendix to thesis):

Dungay, Leah (2016) "'That B\*\*\*\* Ruined My Walk': FEMEN, Fashion Week and Female Spectacle, *JAWS: Journal for Arts Writing By Students*, Volume 2. 1, pp. 19 -27.

Conference Presentation:

*'That B\*\*\*\* Ruined My Walk': Exploring Protest through an Online Media Archive*, presented at The Society for Theatre Research, New Researchers' Network Second Annual Symposium, June 2015.

Word count of main body of thesis: 22,329

Signed: Leah Dungay

Date: 10/10/2017

This thesis examines the dramaturgical strategies of protest employed by the contemporary Ukrainian protest group, FEMEN. In doing so, it draws from theories of protest as performance, outlined by Richard Schechner (1993) and Baz Kershaw (1999). The all-female group are arguably most well known for their use of the topless female body in protest. As such, this thesis will explore FEMEN's use of toplessness in relation to Mary Russo's notions of 'female spectacle' (1994), considering the ways in which the group might challenge understandings regarding the appropriate behaviours and appearances for women.

This exploration of understandings of the female body potentially generated through FEMEN's protest, is considered alongside the group's use of and relationship to space. To do so, it will examine Hannah Arendt's theories surrounding 'action' and the 'spaces of appearance' (1998) and Edward Soja's 'thirdspace' (1996). In doing so, it considers the potential political ramifications of space in relation to FEMEN's protest. Through a characterisation of protest as a form of action, this thesis seeks to expand understandings of the longevity and spatiality of FEMEN's protests, by taking into account the 'spaces of appearance' action may produce.

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## INTRODUCTION

On 21 January 2017, a topless female protester attacked a waxwork of the then recently inaugurated US President Donald Trump at its unveiling in the waxworks museum in Madrid, Spain. Grabbing the waxwork by the (also wax) testicles, the activist cried, “grab patriarchy by the balls”, a slogan which was also emblazoned on her bared chest in thick black writing (*The Guardian*, 2017: online). Alone in her action, apart from the photographers and museum staff who quickly surrounded her, the protester was swiftly restrained and removed by staff after several haphazard attempts to cover her breasts using jackets. Even the red, white and blue balloons which decorated the presidential unveiling were briefly (and desperately) used to cover her, before the protester gleefully threw these into air, to the apparent dismay of those around her (See Fig 1.1). Following the action, the museum’s curator was quick to point out his disappointment at the invasion, noting that he’d wished the unveiling would be a ‘special welcome’ for the president (Reuters, 2017a: online).



Figure 1.1 FEMEN activist covered by balloons during protest at Waxwork Museum (2017)



The topless activist was identified in the subsequent news coverage as a member of FEMEN, an all-female protest group. Co-founded in 2008 by four Ukrainian students – Inna Shevchenko, Anna Hutsol, Oksana Shachko, Sasha Shevchenko – the group have stated that FEMEN is based on their ‘experiences and lives as young women in Ukraine’ (Shevchenko in Tayler, 2013: online). FEMEN have since become internationally known for the controversial subjects of their actions and for their use of female toplessness. Despite this, the group did not set out to protest topless.

In June 2008, during a protest against ‘hot water cuts’ FEMEN’s activists, ‘some in swimsuits and others in their dresses’, jumped into and bathed in a water fountain in the Maidan Square in Kiev, Ukraine (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 45). This protest took place each year, for the following four years, but the group state that ‘[f]or the first two years, we didn’t take our clothes off’ (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 46). Whilst the group state that Oksana Shachko had gone partially topless in an earlier protest, in August 2009, she ‘volunteered to go really topless’ (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 59).

In her account of this act, Shachko suggests that this ‘was [their] best discovery. It was the maximum simplification of the image of a FEMEN girl: topless with an inscription on her body and a crown on her head’ (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 60). Since this, FEMEN have become known for this image and, more specifically, their use of female toplessness, something which the group has embraced. At the time of writing, FEMEN describe themselves as an ‘international protest movement of brave topless activists’ (FEMEN, 2016: online).

Whilst the group were founded and began protesting solely in the Ukraine, FEMEN have since carried out protests throughout Europe, in France, Germany and the UK, as well

as further afield, in countries such as Tunisia. Despite their Ukrainian roots, as of 2012, the concerns for their safety have meant that the majority of the group no longer reside there. After taking part in a protest during which she cut down a wooden cross with a chainsaw, unidentified men allegedly tried to break into Inna Shevchenko's apartment (Tayler, 2013: online). After this incident, Shevchenko fled to Paris, France, alongside other members of the group, which they currently state is the location of their headquarters (FEMEN, 2016: online).

FEMEN's manifesto states that their official 'goal' is the '[c]omplete victory over patriarchy' (2016: online). Since 2008, FEMEN's protests have covered a wide range of subjects and political issues, these include protests against the sex industry in Ukraine in 2012, frequent protests against the current Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and Russia's ongoing annexation of Ukraine, and more recently against the US Presidential candidate (and now President), Donald Trump, at polling stations in New York in 2016, and at the aforementioned waxwork museum in Madrid in 2017. These issues fall under that which Shevchenko has previously stated as the 'three principle manifestations of patriarchy: religion, the sex industry, and dictatorship' (Shevchenko, 2013: online).

FEMEN have seemed to suggest that this 'victory over patriarchy' will be accomplished, or rather fought for, through the creation of 'awareness' for their various causes (FEMEN, 2016: online). This is in part realised through their relationship with the mass media, which FEMEN suggest is vital; as they state 'without the press, we can do nothing' (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 45). Nonetheless, the ways in which awareness for these causes will contribute to the realisation of their goal - the 'victory over patriarchy' – has not yet been made explicitly clear by the group.

FEMEN's use of female toplessness has become the defining visual feature of their protest actions and has become method of ensuring media attention. It is also seemingly at the centre of their self-titled protest strategy of 'Sextremism' (FEMEN, 2016: online). Within their manifesto, the group outline 'Sextremism' as 'female sexuality rebelling against patriarchy' (FEMEN, 2016: online). FEMEN's use of the term 'female sexuality' seems to denote a form of protest which draws upon exaggerated tropes of female sexuality or sexual availability. Given the group's Ukrainian roots, FEMEN have typically drawn from a form of female sexuality and imagery which, they have suggested, are often associated with Ukraine and Eastern Europe. These include bleached blonde hair, which is often associated with the group's co-founder and apparent figure-head, Inna Shevchenko (Figure 1.2), and their use of stereotypically sexualised clothing (stockings, lingerie, high heels etc.). In response to this, Inna Shevchenko has stated, 'we all follow this beauty standard, and I'm not proud of that, of course, but it's a cultural thing' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). However according to Shevchenko, this is deliberate, arguing that they are employing 'an instrument of patriarchy' in the form of traditionally sexualised images, stereotypically associated with Ukraine, and 'using it against [itself]' (Shevchenko, 2013: online).

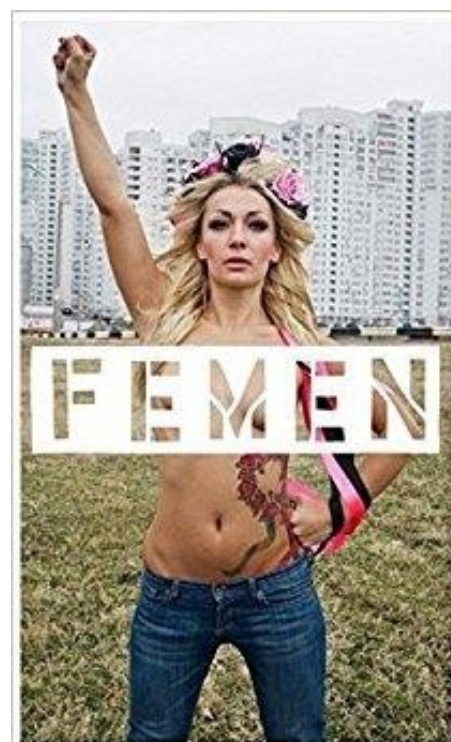


Figure 1.2 Inna Shevchenko on the cover of FEMEN (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014).

Speaking in 2013 with regards to their use of toplessness, Shevchenko contended that because a 'women's naked body has always been the instrument of the patriarchy [...] we realised the key was to give the naked body back to its rightful owner, to women and

give a new interpretation of nudity' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). In this statement Shevchenko conflates the nakedness with toplessness, which is evidently not entirely accurate, as FEMEN's activists are always clothed below the waist. Nonetheless, toplessness is a form of (partial) nudity which can be considered specifically female, as the topless female body carries particularly sexualised connotations which will be discussed throughout this thesis, unlike that of the topless male body.

Personally, having grown up in the 2000's and 2010's, *topless* is a term partly associated with images of bare-breasted women which featured in the popular 'lads mags' of the time (these include FHM, Nuts and Zoo) and 'page 3' – a 40 year tradition held by British newspaper, *The Sun*, of featuring topless women on the third page of its daily publication (Gander, 2015: online). Thus, the term topless (at least in the UK) is somewhat understood in relation to the sexualisation of women, specifically aimed at male audiences, which occurred and were framed by these publications, even if they have since fallen out of fashion. Magazines such as, FHM and Zoo, went out of publication at the end of 2015, and featuring topless women on 'page 3' ended in the same year (though it didn't end entirely, it now features scantily clad women instead of topless women). Thus, *topless* can be a difficult term to use, as it can be associated with the passive sexualisation of women within these contexts. Nonetheless, the term *topless* and *toplessness* is employed throughout in relation to FEMEN, rather than *female nudity*, as it better illustrates the group's protest form and is, in part, an attempt to change the terms on which my own understandings of *toplessness* has been formed.

The topless protest actions undertaken by FEMEN can be argued to draw from a form of 'erotic spectacle'; in this they evoke and employ that which film theorist and critic

Laura Mulvey outlines as the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the female body (1989: 19). However, they do not do so without generating significant bodily and ideological tensions. The 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that is described by Mulvey denotes a female body constructed by men for male (visual) pleasure; in Mulvey's case this is illustrated specifically through a critical investigation into the medium of film. By capitalizing on the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the topless female body within the visual economy of the mass media, FEMEN have argued that their protest form has been employed as a method of ensuring media attention and coverage, specifically through their lack of coverage. In doing so, FEMEN's apparently guaranteed media attention in turn generates vital 'awareness' for their various political causes (Shevchenko, 2015: 234). Nonetheless, their use of a female body which traditionally has been constructed for male pleasure in order to protest female rights issues, has caused confusions, both in the mass media and academic responses to their actions. In doing so, their protest form has generated bodily and ideological tensions arising from their use of female toplessness and the subject matter of their actions, some of which will be examined briefly within this introduction.

#### CRITICAL RESPONSES TO FEMEN

Since 2008, FEMEN have become one of the most prolific and, arguably, one of the most documented female rights groups within the mass media. As such, their protest actions and strategies have been subject to much criticism and analysis in academic disciplines, including Sociology, Women's Studies, Performance Studies, and Media and Communications Studies (Al-Mahadin, 2015; Betlemidze, 2015; Hungerford, 2015; Ivey, 2015; Khrebtan-Hörhager & Kononeko, 2015; Krebtan-Hörhager, 2015, Natalie, 2015; Thomas & Stehling, 2016).

In December 2015, the group were the focus of a series of articles published in an issue of the academic journal *Women's Studies in Communication*. The issue itself, on the theme of 'Conversation and Commentary: FEMEN's Sextremism as (Imperial) Feminism', intended to respond to questions surrounding the 'political possibilities and limitations' of the topless female body in FEMEN's protest actions, the tensions between the group and their Muslim critics, and what these tensions might reveal about 'contemporary feminisms and political cultures' (McAlister, 2015: 358). This special journal issue seems to have emerged from a desire to address and analyse some of the more conflicting and complex responses to FEMEN's protest strategies. As Joan McAlister writes in the introduction to the issue, FEMEN have 'provoked a wide spectrum of reactions' and the tensions and conflicts which are evident in these 'provide particularly rich sites for analysis' for, in this particular instance, communication studies (2015: 358).

The articles within the *Women's Studies in Communication* issue itself provide a range of perspectives and critiques, which reflect the existing cultural and social tensions surrounding FEMEN and their protest strategies. The articles which arose from this special issue form a significant portion of the currently available academic analysis of FEMEN. Nonetheless, the articles examined in the following sections of this introduction are not specifically limited to these and will draw from additional academic sources in its exploration of the key critical themes surrounding FEMEN.

#### FEMEN, TOPLESSNESS AND THE MEDIA

FEMEN have claimed that their topless strategies offer a reinterpretation of the female body through protest, however, Professor Maggie B. Gale has contended from a

performance perspective, that '[t]he gestures of protest offered by protesting female bodies are not free from the gendered visual and sexual economy in which they operate' (2015: 317). For FEMEN, this visual economy refers to their occupation and use of the mass media, through the circulation of images and videos of their protests after they have taken place and FEMEN's use of toplessness is in part intended to generate media attention. However, Gale argues that 'it is difficult to remove perception of the female form from a framework of exploitation or sexualisation, especially when the distribution of such gestures relies on media circulation where the exploitation of women's bodies is embedded' (Gale, 2015: 317).

These concerns have been previously echoed by academic Theresa O'Keefe, who contends that their Sextremist strategies have 'embrace[d] heteronormative, hegemonically masculine ideals of women and sexuality [...] in an attempt to challenge societal norms' (O'Keefe, 2014: online). However, she argues that, the groups 'failure to inject mockery and irony into their approach means it is commonly read as *repetitive of such norms rather than subversive*' (O'Keefe, 2014: online). Likewise, Betlemidze argues that FEMEN's protest strategies conform to and repeat a 'regulated body topology of marketable femininity' in order to garner media attention, in ways which do little to undermine or disrupt these associations (Betlemidze, 2015: 317).

#### FEMEN, RELIGION AND FEMINIST ETHICS

The academic discussion surrounding FEMEN has also examined their topless protest strategies specifically in relation to the context of their geographical and cultural roots in Ukraine. These examine the influence that their move away from Ukraine has had on understandings of the group and their protest strategies (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014; Khrebtan-Hörhage, 2015; Khrebtan-Hörhager & Kononeko, 2015; Thomas & Stehling, 2016).

From a Media and Communications perspective, Tanja Thomas and Miriam Stehling examine the news coverage of FEMEN and their protests within the German media between 2008 and 2013 (2015). In this, they note a marked shift from understanding FEMEN as a 'Ukrainian group to [...] a global organisation' and suggest that this has significantly impacted the ways in which the group are understood (2015: 92). This shift in geographical framing, they argue has 'detached [FEMEN] from its Ukrainian roots and the transculturalization of its activism [...] has led to a more contested form of protest (2015: 92). Similarly, Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager contends that their move away from Ukraine has diminished the 'shocking' nature of their topless protest, as they positioned instead within new and different geographical and cultural contexts. Therefore, she argues that, 'FEMEN's strategies [...] lose their shocking punch and do not drastically clash with already existing and thus commonsensical readings of nudity' in countries such as France and Germany (2015: 396). In doing so, she suggests that this shift, alongside 'favorable perceptions [of nudity] seem to defeat the initial purpose of FEMEN's protests: to spark a new perception of nude corporeality and change the status quo in Ukraine' where the group continually received extremely negative reactions to their toplessness in protest (Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2015: 368).

From a Communications Studies perspective, Elizabeth Natalie suggests it is FEMEN's apparent disregard sensitivity to the different contexts of women's issues which is one of the key issues generating controversy around the group (2015). She states that,

their lack of empathy and incomplete situational knowledge contributes to an irresponsible feminism tied to the presumption that, if a problem exists, it is okay to get involved and speak for the perceived oppressed (2015: 381).

For Natalie, this is reflected in their consistent and unchanging use of female toplessness in protest no matter the geographic or cultural context of their actions. Furthermore, Natalie



draws from interpretations of FEMEN which suggest that they have constructed an understanding of female identity as 'bona fide only when viewed through a Western perspective and when she is free to remove her clothes as proof of enlightenment and liberation' (2015: 318).

Their use of the topless female body as a symbol of women's liberation, whilst at the same time positioning veiling practices as symbols of oppression, according to Natalie,

sparked unprecedented discord among women who saw the actions of FEMEN as potentially "racist" and "colonial feminism" [...] Sextremism has backfired as a symbol of liberation in the case of Muslim women's desires to wear or not wear traditional head garments (2015: 380 - 381).

In light of this, she contends that there is a 'feminist ethics at stake in the debate between FEMEN and Muslim women over practices of veiling' (Natalie, 2015: 381) which FEMEN's current protest strategies fail to fully acknowledge, a perspective which is echoed by critics Christina Ivey (2015), and Salam Al-Mahadin (2015).

These critics have demonstrated that FEMEN and their topless protest form have proven challenging to negotiate, particularly in relation to the cultural and political contexts of their actions. In light of this, the nature and ethics of FEMEN's feminism is also strongly contested, as illustrated by the concerns and criticisms levied against the group and their actions (Ivey, 2015; Al-Mahadin, 2015; Natalie, 2015). Whilst FEMEN's own manifesto describes the group as a 'special force of feminism' (FEMEN, 2016: online), Natalie suggests that FEMEN's actions embody a form of 'irresponsible feminism' (2015: 318).

Feminism can be understood as a wide set of ideologies and movements which aim to achieve and/or campaign for the social, economic and political equality of the sexes. Feminism is broadly outlined by eminent feminist theorist and author, bell hooks, as 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (hooks, 2000: 1). Despite the

criticisms that they have incurred, it is clear that FEMEN do consider themselves a feminist group within these understandings of the term. This is also demonstrated by their protest at the waxwork museum, as FEMEN's challenge to 'grab patriarchy by the balls' echoes that which has been outlined as the 'rallying cry' for the contemporary feminist backlash against President Trump – 'Pussy grabs back' (Puglise, 2016: online).

Nonetheless, FEMEN are a unique contemporary protest group, not necessarily in relation to their topless protest form, but in the sheer number of protest actions they have undertaken since 2008<sup>1</sup>. In this time the core members of FEMEN have changed, as has their stances on the political issues they have campaigned against. As the cultural, political and social contexts of their actions are continually shifting, FEMEN have presented a specific difficulty when considering issues surrounding their political efficacy, or their position as a feminist protest group, as reflected in the criticisms above.

In light of the contentions and complexities examined above, this thesis will consider *how and why we might understand FEMEN's performances of protest as feminist?* As highlighted so far, there are clearly issues when considering FEMEN as a feminism group (which stem from cultural and geographical framing of their protests and use of female toplessness) and to be clear, it is not the aim of this thesis to refute or dismiss the criticisms of FEMEN which have been outlined. Rather, by exploring theories from strands of political philosophy, performance theory and political geography in relation to FEMEN, this research aims to generate potentially new understandings of the group and their strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus far, there exists no comprehensive list of protests undertaken by the group, however, this will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three.

This thesis aims to *identify and analyse the dramaturgical strategies employed by FEMEN in their protests*, whilst outlining what form these strategies take and how they are employed by the group. As such, I employ modes of analysis and understanding protest as performance from within Performance Studies, predominantly outlined by eminent Theatre and Performance academics Richard Schechner (1993) and Baz Kershaw (1999).

Both Schechner and Kershaw have written extensively in relation to experimental or radical performance and protest, and in doing so, Kershaw outlines a '*dramaturgy of protest as performance*' which analyses protest in relation to the 'recognisable theatrical components' at play within these events (Kershaw, 1999: 91, emphasis in original). Broadly, these components are outlined in relation to uses of space, forms of costuming, choreography, and speech (Kershaw, 1991: 91).

The term 'strategy' is employed in relation to FEMEN's protest form, in order to outline a set of practices consistently used by the group in protest. In particular, my use of strategy in this context derives from Judith Butler's use of the term in relation to the construction of gender, and the construction of the category of 'woman' (1998: 522). As a philosopher and gender theorist, Butler's research examines the construction and resistance of gender and gendered identity (Butler, 1988; 1990). In this, she argues that representations of gender have been established through the 'exterior space [of the physical body] through a stylised repetition of acts' (1990: 179). As such, Butler constructs an understanding of 'identity as an effect', culturally constructed and reiterated over time (1990: 179). However, Butler suggests that 'strategy' is best placed to describe the construction of gender, as she states,

because gender is a project which has cultural survival at its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs (Butler, 1988: 522, emphasis added).

I argue that FEMEN's protest form and representations of the body, specifically their use of female toplessness, has been constructed and developed within 'situation[s] of duress' (Butler, 1988: 552). These include FEMEN's cultural roots in Ukraine, but which also include the subsequent mass media coverage of their protests, as well as the physical restrictions encountered due to the apparently illegality of their protests. FEMEN's strategies of protest have taken into account (or rather been influenced by) these contexts, subsequently changing according to the situations and spaces they encounter.

As spatiality is itself fundamental to the dramaturgy of performance, this thesis will examine and identify the key characteristics of FEMEN's use of space in protest. As such I will be drawing from spatial theorists such as Edward Soja (1996), and theories surrounding the 'spaces of appearance' (Arendt, 1998: 200). In doing so, I will look to *examine the potential political ramifications and effects of space in relation to FEMEN's protest actions*.

As evident in the critical responses to FEMEN explored above, the focus has been on the outcomes and effects FEMEN's protest actions and the group as a whole have had, rather than on the protest actions themselves. On the other hand, this thesis will focus on the protest actions themselves, and the dramaturgical strategies employed by FEMEN. In doing so, it will be employing 'action' as a rigorous model of politics, as outlined by political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958/1998). In her lifetime, Arendt published many influential texts on topics including the subject of evil, freedom, revolution, work and labour and judgement (Arendt, 1958; 1978; 2006; 2009). In these, Arendt emphasises the significance of political engagement and deliberation, as well as revolution, as these are connected to

nality, or the human potential for newness, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Arendt's conception of politics is broad, in that she focuses on what is done (i.e. the action), rather than the subsequent effects these actions may have. This research project is the product of an extensive engagement with the subsequent representations of FEMEN's protest actions through an online media archive of newspapers and magazine articles, blogs and videos. In FEMEN's instance, the novelty isn't in the dramaturgy they employ (even if the means may be novel themselves) but in the apparent longevity of these actions and their spatiality, which can be seen to arise from their subsequent mediatisation. As such, Arendt's characterisation of action can be employed to examine the mediatised representations of FEMEN's protest as a part of the action itself. These materials are employed specifically because these are indivisible from action, as it is defined by Arendt.

I will use these theoretical approaches to analyse specific protest actions carried out by FEMEN between 2011 and 2017 in order to outline the dramaturgical strategies which have been consistently employed by the group. These include FEMEN's protests during the Euro 2012 Football Championships in Ukraine, during Fashion Week in Paris, France (2013), the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (2013) and the Waxwork Museum in Madrid, Spain (2017). These examples, whilst not exclusively so, will mostly be limited to those which took place after 2011 and 2012. Since this time FEMEN's protest strategy has not altered in any significant way, thus focusing on protests after this time allows for an

analysis of the strategies which have been consistently employed, as well as why these in particular have been established as ‘standard practice’ for the group.<sup>2</sup>

#### THESIS OUTLINE

The first chapter, titled ‘FEMEN’s Dramaturgies of Protest’, will outline the deliberate dramaturgical strategies of protest employed by the group, including their relationship to space and use of slogans (Schechner, 1993; Kershaw, 1999). In doing so, it will explore FEMEN’s use of toplessness in relation to literature and critical theorist Mary Russo’s notions of ‘female spectacle’ (1994: 44), considering the ways in which the group might challenge understandings regarding the appropriate behaviours and appearances for women. Lastly, it will examine FEMEN’s protest against President Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus (2011), to consider the potential political ramifications of disrupting public space through protest.

The second chapter, ‘FEMEN, Action and Space of Appearance,’ will explore the relationship between FEMEN and space, focussing specifically on their disruption of private spaces through protest and aspects of risk. In doing so, it will consider FEMEN in relation to Arendt’s theory of ‘action’ to expand and begin to characterise the longevity and spatially beyond the initial instance of protest itself, by taking into account the ‘spaces of appearances’ (Arendt, 1994: 22).

The final chapter, ‘Thirdspace, Media and Female Toplessness,’ will draw from the work of Edward Soja (1996). As an urban geographer, Soja, is known for his work surrounding space, urban planning, spatial justice and cities, most notably his hometown of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the formation of these strategies is not important when considering FEMEN’s protest strategies, and will be touched upon in this thesis, but this development is not the sole focus of this research.

Los Angeles. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Soja sets out the critical spatial process of 'thirding' as a means of challenging binary modes of understandings space (1996: 61). This chapter will employ 'thirding' in order to examine the spatiality of FEMEN's protests, both in their location and form. In doing so, it will outline the ways in which FEMEN may generate a form of politicised female toplessness through protest, and how this attempts to challenge binary understandings of space and the female body. Lastly, it will consider the potential ramifications regarding FEMEN's use of and relationship to the mass media through protest.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### FEMEN'S DRAMATURGICAL STRATEGIES OF PROTEST

#### PROTEST AS PERFORMANCE, CARNIVAL AND THE LIMINAL

Within contemporary Performance Studies discourses, the analysis of protest as performance is notably characterised by Richard Schechner (1993) and Baz Kershaw (1999). Both Schechner and Kershaw contend that protest events have the ability to generate liminal spaces of cultural and political possibility. In *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (1993), Schechner analyses various forms of festival, carnival and protest, contextualising the latter in the events of Tiananmen Square, China, in 1989 and Vietnam War demonstrations in Washington, US, in 1970, among others. In doing so, Schechner outlines the cultural and political tensions produced through these protest actions, the form they take and the spaces they occupy. Likewise, Kershaw draws from these examples of protest within *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (1999), extending the analysis offered by Schechner to begin to outline a '*dramaturgy of protest as performance*' (1999: 19, emphasis in original).

Both Schechner and Kershaw's usage shifts between the terms 'liminal' and 'liminoid' to outline this space of apparent possibility within protest and carnival. However, Kershaw states that the distinction can be drawn, according to Victor Turner, through 'choice' (Turner, 1979: 39). Turner states that, the 'carnival is unlike a [...] ritual in that it can be attended or avoided, performed or merely watched at will' (Turner, 1979: 39). According to Schechner, Turner refers to the 'arts and leisure activities' as liminoid specifically, as



‘[l]iminal rites are obligatory while liminoid activities are voluntary’ (Schechner, 1993: 258).

Thus, the *liminal* pertains to *ritual*, whilst the *liminoid* better characterises *carnival*.

Nonetheless, I will in this instance employ the term liminal in relation to the conditions and spaces generated by protest, avoiding that which Kershaw terms the ‘risk [of] an oversimplification of the relationship between liminal and liminoid experiences’ (1999: 78).

Instead, liminal here refers to the boundary or threshold between performance and ‘everyday life’; space for potential subversion, transformation and transgression.

Both Schechner and Kershaw, connect and conflate the terms carnival and protest within their analysis and discussion of protest events. Schechner’s analysis contends that both revolution (a term used in this instance to refer to protest events and movements) and festival can be understood as ‘carnavalesque’, suggesting that both forms open up a liminal space and time for social and political transgression (Schechner, 1993: 47).<sup>3</sup> As such, protest and festival events can both be seen to be carnivalesque, in that they ‘*activate the basic functions of carnival [...] transgressing, up-ending, mocking and in other ways destabilising the images and structures of authority*’ (Kershaw, 1999: 107, emphasis added).

As a group FEMEN can be seen to be performing these basic functions of carnival through the protest events they undertake, mocking and disobeying authority figures and undemocratic rule as they see fit. This is illustrated by their 2011 protest in Minsk, Belarus. This protest, levied against the President Alexander Lukashenko and the conditions surrounding his re-election in 2010, was staged in front of the Committee for State Security, or the ‘KGB’, building in the country’s capital. It featured one topless female activist,

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter will go on to draw from theories of the ‘carnavalesque’ in relation to the female body, as it is outlined by Marry Russo (1994).

Aleksandra Nemchinova, dressed as a mocking caricature of Lukashenko (as can be seen Figure 2.1), her head had been shaved especially, along with a 'thick moustache and [...] fake eyebrows' which had been glued on (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 108).



Figure 2.1 Screenshot of FEMEN protesting in Minsk, Belarus in 2011

FEMEN's protests can be seen to employ some of the more usual tropes of protest as a performance form, as drawn upon by Schechner and Kershaw throughout their analysis, such as the use of chanting, the occupation and disruption of public spaces, and use of placards, to name a few. These elements come together to form, that which Kershaw characterises, as the *dramaturgy of protest as performance* (1999: 19).

Whilst dramaturgy can be understood as a 'slippery' term (Turner & Behrndt, 2008: 18), put simply, it can refer to the structure or 'composition of a work', whichever form that work may take (Turner & Behrndt, 2008: 17). By drawing on this term, Kershaw outlines the dramaturgy of protest as performance as a means of analysis which deliberately takes into account the theatrical components at play within these events. The dramaturgical strategies of protest employed by FEMEN are not fixed, they have altered over time according to contexts and responses which I will examine throughout, and as such these strategies may

still change. However, this thesis will examine those which have, thus far, been consistently employed by the group.

#### SLOGANS, TOPLESSNESS, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN PROTEST

For FEMEN, these theatrical components include their use of slogans, or 'signs', which are also a common element of protest events. In FEMEN's case, these usually take the form of their painted torsos, their bare chests acting as placards. In Minsk, as one of FEMEN's earlier protests, the activists can still be seen using physical placards held high above their bare torsos, denouncing Lukashenko's regime and demanding 'Freedom to Political Prisoners' (as evident in Figure 2.1). However, whilst topless in protests, FEMEN apparently noticed that their banners and placards (when held above their naked torsos) were being cropped out of images presented in the media. As such, the activists then began painting their slogans directly onto their chests (Cochrane, 2013: online). This form can be seen during the protest event at the Waxwork Museum in Spain, as the activist's bare breasts read 'Grab Back' (as can be seen in Figure 2.2).



*Figure 2.2 FEMEN protest President Trump Waxwork Unveiling in Madrid, Spain.*

As a group, FEMEN have come to be recognised internationally for their topless protests. As mentioned, the group had not initially intended to focus on toplessness as a protest form, but they also suggest that media interest and coverage of their protests ‘went global’ as a result (Cochrane, 2013: online). For FEMEN, though partially developed through their interaction with the media, their use of female toplessness in protest is hailed as a representation of the ‘new aesthetics of women’s revolution’ (FEMEN, 2016: online). In their use of female toplessness, FEMEN employ a body which can be typically understood as sexualised, to protest against the very institutions which they see as constructing and reinforcing this sexualisation. This is evident in comments made by FEMEN’s activists; Sasha Shevchenko states that ‘[w]e might seem like girls from Playboy but we stand for something very different’ (Glass, 2012: online).

Within their manifesto FEMEN contend that the female body is ‘an object of monstrous patriarchal exploitation’ within a system which has ‘stripped [women] of ownership of [their] own bodies’ (FEMEN, 2016: online). As such, FEMEN’s manifesto argues that the ‘right to [a woman’s own] body is the first and most important step to her liberation’ (FEMEN, 2016: online).<sup>4</sup> Thus, for FEMEN their use of toplessness in protest, described as ‘naked attacks’, act as the ‘most visual and appropriate illustrations’ of the group’s intentions and goals (FEMEN, 2016: online).

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<sup>4</sup> Within this understanding, FEMEN are equating nudity, or a form of nudity, with female liberation, a viewpoint which has subsequently been challenged (O’Keefe, 2014). Critics have argued that this belief potentially ‘universalises women’s experiences with nudity and sexualisation’ (O’Keefe, 2014: online). In light of this, the analysis presented here does not aim to necessarily agree with the statements made within their manifesto, but rather draws from it to examine how FEMEN’s strategies have developed, and how these relate to the ideologies they have generated.

FEMEN's continued use of female toplessness is demonstrated within their protest at Fashion Week in Paris, France, in 2013. In September that year, two topless FEMEN activists arrived at the Nina Ricci Spring/Summer '14 catwalk show and on finding a way into the show itself, they abruptly joined the models onstage. Within this event, their slogans had shifted from their cardboard placards to their bare torsos, with 'model don't go to brothel' and 'fashion dictat-terror' painted in thick black lettering. These activists faced countless photographers, video camera and journalists at the end of the catwalk for a few seconds, before being hauled away by security following a brief struggle.

According to FEMEN's official website, this protest aimed to 'rebel against the exploitation of women's bodies in the fashion industry (FEMEN, 2015: online). The location of this action, the catwalk, can be understood as a space wherein the female body is produced and reproduced according to heteronormative, hegemonic standards of behaviour and appearance which are determined and reinforced by institutions such as the fashion industry. In an interview in 2013, Shevchenko states, 'a woman's naked body has always been the instrument of the patriarchy [...] they use it in the sex industry, the fashion industry [and] advertising' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). The connection between the control of the female body and fashion industry is echoed by Susan Bordo, who argues that one way in which women have been traditionally confined to the body is through its 'beautification' (1993: 17). This understanding is echoed in FEMEN's use of the slogan 'fashion dictat-error', which suggests a form of 'dictatorship' within the fashion industry, controlling and regulating women's bodies from the catwalk.

By employing female toplessness within their protests, FEMEN can be seen to capitalise on the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' the female body implies within institutions such as

the fashion industry. In relation to mainstream cinema, Mulvey argued that women displayed 'as sexual object [became] the leitmotif of erotic spectacle' in film, which in turn meant that the 'pleasure in looking' had been split between the 'active/male and passive/female' (1989: 19). As such, the female body has become positioned as passive bearer of erotic meaning and/or understanding, connoting a "'to-be-looked-at-ness" of passivity and display' (Mulvey, 1989: 19). This understanding of the female body, as it is characterised by Mulvey, is heightened within the space of the catwalk. Women are, put simply, walking down a catwalk in order *to be looked at*. Mulvey's to-be-looked-at-ness connects women, and the understanding of women in popular culture, to their bodies. This is a connection that FEMEN illustrate within their manifesto and further embrace through their toplessness, but that which is not without its difficulties, as noted in critical responses to their protest form discussed in the Introduction.

In discussing the use of female nudity in performance through the work of Nic Green and Ursula Martinez, Sarah Gorman outlines the ways in which these female performers are able to 'embrace, or avoid, the problem of female immanence, that is *the problem of female identity being inextricably associated with the body*' (2013: 49, emphasis added). In doing so, she draws from Amelia Jones, arguing that female performers have struggled to distance themselves from this immanence, within the 'conventional understandings of women's experience being fundamentally anchored to a bodily experience' (Gorman, 2013: 49).

Gorman contends that within the 'feminist theories popular in the 1990's' the female body struggled to operate outside of the 'symbolic logic of phallocentrism', as it was unable to escape this 'sexual objectification' (2013: abstract). Within theories of 'radical negativity' which are cited by Gorman, the female body was to operate on the margins of 'mainstream

culture [...] removed from view' to escape this logic (2013: abstract). Rather than explicitly aiming to deny this logic, Gorman argues that Green and Martinez, through varying uses of female nudity in performance 'suggest ways of acknowledging that women may influence the reception of images [of the female body] by intervening in the context of reception' (Gorman, 2013: 106).

It is clear from the language used within their manifesto that FEMEN's notion of *woman* is one 'inextricably associated with the body' (Gorman, 2013: 49). As their manifesto states, '[i]n the beginning was the body, the sensation that women has of her own body' (FEMEN, 2014: vii). However, for the group, the female body has become an instrument of the patriarchy, wielded not by women, but seen as wielded by and 'always in men's hands' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). In contrast, FEMEN see their use of the body as a means of embracing this immanence, this connection between women and the body, whilst attempting to alter the grounds on which it is understood, formed and controlled. For FEMEN then, their subjective experience is connected to the body, and their own 'liberation' begins with it.<sup>5</sup>

The 'context of reception' in relation to FEMEN, can be understood as twofold, relating to the initial, physical, context of the protest event, and the subsequent documentation of the event<sup>6</sup>. At Paris Fashion Week in 2013, the initial site of reception is the physical location of the catwalk. As discussed above, the catwalk can be argued to act as a key site of control and regulation in relation to the female body. Female nudity, or partial nudity, is not unusual on the catwalk, though for FEMEN their use is apparently different, as

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<sup>5</sup> There are issues with their understanding, and part of these stem from when the group 'speak for' other marginalised groups through protest, for whom this is not their experience (Kolsy, 2013: online).

<sup>6</sup> The mediatization of FEMEN's protests will also be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

they claim agency and control over the female body, and how the female body is presented and performed by their activists (though it is also possible to claim that the female models on the catwalk could state the same). As Shevchenko argues, the bodies of the activists visible within their protest events are essentially *in women's hands*; 'we're not showing a passive smiling body, we're showing an aggressive screaming body' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

Within the protest at Fashion Week, the group can be argued to embody a female form which arguably conforms to classical notions of 'ideal' female beauty, which are reinforced by institutions such as the fashion industry. Members of FEMEN are often of a slim build, and their appearances are seen to adhere to typical western standards of female beauty<sup>7</sup>. At their protest in Minsk, co-founders Shevchenko and Oksana epitomise this form (as seen in Figure 2.1) stood either side of Nemchinova. Whereas here, playing the role of Lukashenko, Nemchinova is physically very dissimilar in appearance; a difference which is highlighted by FEMEN, '[t]rue, she weighs 120 kilos and doesn't really fit the FEMENf image'<sup>8</sup>(FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 106).

This 'image' that FEMEN have curated for themselves (or has been curated for them within the media), is deliberately derived from the 'very sexual objectification [they're] protesting against' (Cochrane, 2013: online). Theatre and performance academic Rebecca Schneider employs the term 'explicit body' in relation to female body art and performance

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<sup>7</sup> The FEMEN's activists are repeatedly described as being 'attractive' both in academic and mass media responses to their protests; 'young, attractive female activists' (Betlemidze, 2015: 379), 'conventionally attractive Caucasian women' (Natalle, 2015: 382), 'beautiful blondes' (Aitkenhead, 2013: online).

<sup>8</sup> This comment is undeniably problematic, but has been countered by the group on other occasions, wherein Shevchenko has argued that the group 'have never chosen women according to their looks, or weight; the only proviso is that they have to be well prepared' (Cochrane, 2013: online). Journalist and writer, Kira Cochrane, states that images of FEMEN activists who do not typically fit this 'image' are evident in their book FEMEN (2014), but that she has never seen these photographs elsewhere. Thus she suggests this is partly the fault of the media, stating that '[t]he media, unsurprisingly, pick the most obviously attractive photos' (2013: online).



(which contains forms of nudity or exposure) in order to interrogate ‘socio-cultural understandings of the “appropriate” and/or the appropriately transgressive – *particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and, who has the right to appropriate what where*’ (1997: 3, emphasis added). In relation to performance artist Annie Sprinkle, Schneider suggests that rather than ‘positioning itself against the sexualisation of the female body [her work] attempts to wield the master’s tools against the master’s house, to force a *second look* at the terms and terrain of that sexualisation’ (Schneider, 1997: 105, emphasis in original).

By employing a female form, or ‘look’ associated with its sexualisation, arguably emphasised by its toplessness, FEMEN can be seen to ‘wield the master’s tools against the master’s house’ as it is described by Schneider (1997: 105). On the catwalk, the protesters’ bodies are not significantly unlike those walking down the catwalk alongside them (as can be seen in Figure 2.3), but Shevchenko states the protest events undertaken by the group are presenting this body ‘in a different context’, employed with different intentions (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

That FEMEN’s activists can be seen as traditionally beautiful has become standard criticism of the group, as is suggested in one article about the group, ‘there is something [...] suspect about the preponderance of beautiful blondes

among FEMEN’s [...] activists’ (Cochrane, 2013: online). In response, Shevchenko contends that this is partly due to their Ukrainian roots, ‘we all follow this beauty standard, and I’m not proud of that, of course, but it’s a cultural thing’ (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013:



Figure 2.3 FEMEN protest at Paris Fashion Week (2013)

online). However, she goes on to suggest this is an illustration of their ideology, alongside toplessness, '[w]hat we are showing is the victim of patriarchy. But now she's rebelling and she's fighting' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). Thus, FEMEN contend they are giving the female body back to its 'rightful owner' (though they remain unclear as to who this rightful owner is, other than stating 'women') in the hope that they perform 'a new interpretation of nudity' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

FEMEN's protest at Fashion Week can be seen to hijack the 'site of reception' (as it is described by Gorman), in this instance the catwalk, through their topless protest. They can also be seen to do so with a body explicitly connected to their critique of the fashion industry, through the slogans written on their bare chests. In doing so, FEMEN evoke the notion of the 'second look' characterised by Schneider, inviting a reconsideration at 'the terms and terrain' of the sexualisation and understanding of the female body within this space (Schneider, 1997: 105).

The dramaturgical strategies of protest employed by FEMEN outlined so far are, in part, intended by the group to generate an alternate disruptive understanding of the female body, one which is not inherently understood as sexual and/or passive. The components, such as their use of female toplessness and the slogans painted onto their chests, form a dramaturgical strategy of protest which connects their ideology directly to their bodies via protest. The following section will consider these components, alongside an examination of their use of and relationship to space in protest, considering how these might construct a form of 'female spectacle' as it is characterised by Mary Russo (1994).

Within the popular discourses surrounding FEMEN, their actions are often referred to in terms of their *spectacular* nature, with particular focus on the ‘spectacle of [their] toplessness’ (Brownie, 2016: 65) or that FEMEN generate a ‘topless spectacle’ (Rojo & Harrington, 2013: online). In *The Society of the Spectacle*, philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord outlines the modern human condition, and in which he describes spectacle as not simply a collection of images, but as a ‘social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (1967/1995: 12). Rather than being understood as the product of contemporary technologies that allows for the distribution of images such as the mass media, spectacle rather is a ‘world view transformed into an objective force’ (Debord, 1995: 13).

Debord’s understanding suggests that spectacle, is *how* something is perceived, rather than *what* is being perceived. This is in turn echoed by Russo, who contends that ‘the spectacle is a way of looking’ (1994: 79). In relation to FEMEN, their bodies and the protest events they undertake, their use of toplessness as is suggested by the critical and mediatised responses, but rather how these are understood and presented which potentially makes them spectacular. As such, FEMEN aim to challenge *how* the topless female body is understood within this spectacle. As such, we may consider the ways in which FEMEN’s protest events can be argued to produce, or to *be*, forms of spectacle and how understandings of spectacle are connected to the dramaturgical strategies of protest they employ.

In *Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Russo argues that to make a spectacle of oneself is understood as a ‘specifically feminine danger’ (1994: 53). She argues that when women are described as a spectacle, it forms an

impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn [...] yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she were not careful. (Russo, 1994: 53, emphasis in original)

Russo's statement suggests that when women make a spectacle of themselves, they do so 'inadvertently' and are deemed as such by others (1994: 53). The repeated reference to the 'spectacle of [...] topless women' in relation to FEMEN, suggests that the group have, in some way, made spectacles of themselves through protest (Garnett, 2017: 269).

#### THE FEMALE GROTESQUE

In her discussion of spectacle, Russo outlines the condition of the 'female grotesque' (1994: 10). She argues that this body can be understood or is distinguishable 'in relation to a norm' (1994: 10). In this, Russo states that the 'careful scrutiny and segmentation of female body types [...] separate out individuals as exceptions that prove the rule', these exceptions are outlined in terms of the grotesque (1994: 10). Within the confines of the Fashion Week protest, FEMEN bodies and behaviours are compared and contrasted within the mediatization of the group, to those of the female bodies, the models, which usually occupy the space of the catwalk.

During the protest, the female activists are seen running and clambering on the stage; in this moment the women are already topless and painted with slogans. After successfully making it onto the stage itself, they began to shout 'fashion fascism', as they quickly ran towards the end of the catwalk. On her way there, one of the activists can be seen reaching for the hand of a model, who is seemingly still calmly making her way around the catwalk, and raises it into the air. The model frees her hand and carries on, while the two activists are dragged off of the catwalk by security guards.

In a response by fashion journalist Jennifer Barton, FEMEN are accused of disrupting the 'lady-like elegance' which was expected from the Nina Ricci show that day (Barton, 2013: online). Generally, 'lady-like' can be understood as a term used to denote the appropriate, or typical, behaviours and appearances for women or girls. For instance, the term is used frequently in news article headlines by British newspaper, *Daily Mail*, to describe the clothing choices of female celebrities: 'Mom Duties! Ivanka Trump Models a Ladylike Frock and Pearl Earrings [...]' (Tempesta, 2017: online), 'Karlie Kloss Cuts a Ladylike Figure in Chic Belted Trench Coat [...]' (Moir, 2015: online), 'Myleene Klass goes for Ladylike Chic in Stunning Floral Midi Dress [...]' (Rose, 2017: online). Within these headlines, the clothing choices (from the 'chic' trench coat to the pearl earrings) are positioned as appropriately lady-like, an appropriate choice for these women to make in regards to their appearance. Thus, the 'lady-like elegance' which was seemingly expected at Fashion Week is positioned as the 'appropriate' choice in relation to female behaviour and appearance. Within this example, FEMEN do not conform to this outline of appropriate female behaviour, instead, they perform a disruption of this apparent 'norm'.

Whilst FEMEN may not be understood as grotesque, in the sense that their bodies may fit an 'ideal' which is performed at fashion week, their behaviour and use of their bodies 'emerges as a deviation from the norm' within the space of the catwalk (Russo, 1994: 11). Russo argues that '[n]ormalization as it is enforced [...] has been harsh and effective in its highly calibrated differentiation of female bodies' and thus distinguishes some bodies in relation to the grotesque in terms of behaviour and appearance (1994: 10). On the one hand, FEMEN are arguably positioned at odds with the ladylike elegance expected at fashion week. On the other, the bodies of FEMEN's activists often fit a classical 'ideal' in terms of

female appearance, a fact that has led to issues with the popular reception of the group. As briefly discussed earlier, FEMEN's 'look' and their use of toplessness in protest, has led to doubts surrounding their ability to operate as a feminist protest group (Cochrane, 2013: online).

FEMEN have been described as being '[obsessed] with nudity' and subsequently the female body itself in their use of toplessness, in a way which focuses on 'self-promotion' rather than the issues they are protesting against (Nagarajan, 2013: online). Often, the public responses to their protests echo these criticisms, as seen among the comments left on a *Fashtionista.com* article reporting of the Paris Fashion Week protest (Fig 2.4 and 2.5).



Figure 2.4 Selection of comments from *Fashionista.com* (Phelan, 2013: online).

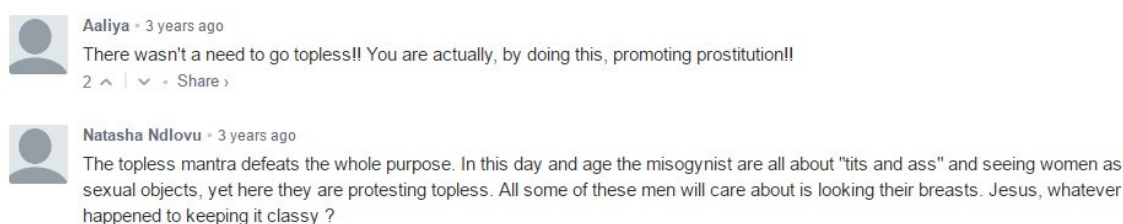


Figure 2.5 Selection of comments from *Fashionista.com* (Phelan, 2013: online).

The assumed sexualisation of the topless female body is emphasised within these examples, as one commenter suggests, by employing toplessness FEMEN are actually 'promoting prostitution'. In these comments it is clear that for some, FEMEN's use of the topless form

as a self-proclaimed feminist group is considered hypocritical or contradictory, but I would argue this is a very simplistic view of FEMEN's use of toplessness.

FEMEN are not the only example of a group or individual who have encountered dismissal or criticism based on their varying levels of toplessness. In a photoshoot for *Vanity Fair* in 2017, actress Emma Watson apparently caused controversy over an image in which she was cited as being 'topless' (Edelstein, 2017; Boulton, 2017). In reality, the image is far from FEMEN's own toplessness, Watson's torso is covered in part by a 'white crocheted bolero jacket' with only the middle of her chest visible (Reuters, 2017b: online).

Nonetheless, this single image (one of a series shot for the magazine) was used in order to question and dismiss Watson's claims of being a feminist, or being taken seriously as a feminist (Wilson, 2017). At the same, Watson's response to these criticisms 'as ridiculous' were in turn criticised. In a lengthy article for *The Guardian*, Jean Edelstein accuses Watson of using feminism solely as part of her 'brand', claiming that '[s]he could have cited the photograph as a case of feminism in action, of a woman taking agency over her own sexuality' (Edelstein, 2017: online). Instead, Edelstein claims that 'her dismissal of it being part of the conversation doesn't sit easily with her progressive credentials' (2017: online).

As Russo suggests, for women to make spectacles of themselves, the danger is one of inadvertent or negative exposure, subsequently representing a 'loss of boundaries' for the women involved, which here can be understood in relation to behaviours or appearances considered appropriate. In the responses towards FEMEN and Watson, though themselves very different examples of toplessness, their use of the nude (or even partially nude) female body is also positioned as being at odds with any claim to feminism or a political agenda. Watson is able to claim to be a feminist as long as she does so in clothing deemed

appropriate. In this the topless female body, is seen as inherently sexualised, which cannot at the same time, be a political body, or belong to women claiming to be feminist or political.

This notion of a loss of boundaries, or of transgression, can also be seen literally in the number of legal battles FEMEN have encountered in response to their protests, which specifically include their use of female toplessness. In 2013, FEMEN activist Iana Zhdanova attacked a waxwork figurine of Vladimir Putin at the Musee Grevin in Paris, France. Zhdanova was subsequently charged with 'vandalism [...] and "sexual exhibition"', the latter charge relating to her use of toplessness during the protest (Huffington Post, 2014: Online). After FEMEN's topless protest in February 2015 against the former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn in Lille, France, three FEMEN activists were again tried in court 'on the charge of sexual exhibition', and again these three activists were topless (Agence France-Presse, 2016: online). The three activists were eventually acquitted a year later (Agence France-Presse, 2016: online).

For FEMEN then, the danger is not necessarily one of inadvertent exposure (as they have chosen to protest topless), but is signalled by the formal responses to their protest, both social and legal, which in the latter may lead to their arrest. In these instances of protest, FEMEN are understood as an 'embodiment of [...] error' distinguishable and thus, literally, punishable in relation to a 'norm' (Russo, 1994: 11). Although these differ from country to country, the social, cultural and legal boundaries surrounding female toplessness, whilst at times difficult to navigate, have in these instances implied an understanding of the topless female body which is innately sexual, and thus 'indecent'.



Within Russo's discussion of women and spectacle, she outlines the dichotomy between the production of 'women as spectacle', or rather as spectacular commodity, and 'women as producers of spectacle' (1994: 165). In this understanding, women are seemingly positioned as either passive or active in their production of spectacle. However, FEMEN's construction of female spectacle seemingly complicates the dichotomy outlined by Russo. As discussed, FEMEN continuously make use of a body which can be understood, and readily relayed as erotic, or spectacular commodity. In this use of the female body, FEMEN are performing themselves '*as spectacle*' through protest, but in the same breath they can also be understood as active '*producers of spectacle*' (Russo, 1994: 165, emphasis added).

FEMEN's use of female toplessness has, at least with regards to their potential illegality, generated a form of *female spectacle* through protest within these public spaces. This term, 'female spectacle', can be understood as the performance of a body, specifically one read or coded as female, occupying a position of error in relation to a norm, whether inadvertently or deliberately (Russo, 1994: 44). FEMEN's dramaturgical strategies of protest, their use of the female body through toplessness and their relationship to space (which will be examined in more detail in the following chapters) can then be argued to construct a form of female spectacle, in order to challenge binary understandings of the female body.

#### PUBLIC SPACE, DISRUPTION AND VIOLENCE

For Schechner, a cultural 'liminal period' of political uncertainty and instability is established through protest events when its participants, or protesters, temporarily occupy public spaces (1993: 46). This is because, he contends, the spaces generated through 'revolution and carnival' within these public locations, reveal a 'new time to enact social relations more freely' (1993: 47). Once protest events come to a close however, Schechner

argues that the liminal period subsequently ends and 'individuals are reinserted into their [...] places in society' (1993: 47). Whilst the 'freedoms' afforded to participants may wane once these instances of protest or carnival have ended, the 'liminal period' represents a threshold, an in-between, a space between boundaries and restrictions wherein participants can subvert their own social positions and relations. In the examples of protest offered by Schechner and Kershaw, these public spaces are deliberately occupied by protesters as they are understood to embody cultural or political significance, and thus are usually reserved for 'official displays' of authority and power (Schechner, 1993: 46).

Nonetheless, Kershaw argues that the focus on the 'formal similarities' with theories of carnival, such as those proposed by Schechner, 'detracts from protest's [discrete] contribution[s] to the major ideological shifts of specific periods' (1999: 108). As such, he argues that the analysis of dramaturgical strategies at play within protest events must also take into account the ways in which 'they are part of the wider socio-political histories under way in the moment of their happening' (Kershaw, 1999: 108). In this sense, Kershaw argues that the context of protest events effectively 'pushes the drama beyond the carnival' (Kershaw, 1999: 107). In Belarus for example, the KBG building in front of which FEMEN carried out their protest in 2011 had, only a year earlier, been the location of mass demonstrations against the re-election of President Lukashenko, described as the 'continent's last dictator' (Taylor, 2011: online). Thus at the same time, these spaces sometimes also present the best opportunity to have those in positions of power take note of the demands or aims of a protest event.

Kershaw argues that typically within these official public spaces the 'display[s] of power' and authority can be seen as more significant to the 'maintenance of law and order

[than the] actual powers of coercion and control' (1999: 92-3). Thus, through the occupation of public spaces which would usually play host to displays of power (or like the KGB building in Minsk, wherein the space itself functions as a display of institutional power), protest events are capable of 'disrupting the [...] hegemony' through their own means, 'opening up new forms of ideological exchange between civil society and the State, new social movements and institutional power' (Kershaw, 1999: 122).

Consequently, the 'disruption' of protests in these instances, would also expose the 'systems of domination' at play within these formal institutions of power and authority (Kershaw, 1999: 93). Kershaw contends that when forces such as the police or military intervene, sometimes violently, 'official' power reveals a 'predisposition to [physical] violence' as a means of coercion and control (1999: 94). This is evident in the events which followed FEMEN's protest in Belarus, which was apparently met with considerable violence, as have other instances of mass protest in the country. After FEMEN's action in Minsk, it was revealed that the activists involved in the protest had been subsequently followed and abducted later that same day. In an account by Inna Shevchenko, she describes the group being taken by men and tortured as they attempted to catch a bus out of the country (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 109). This echoes the intimidation and violence faced by those who had taken part in the mass demonstrations also in Minsk, in 2010. As Jerome Taylor describes in an article for *The Guardian*, almost all of the 'presidential candidates who dared stand against Lukashenko [...] have been imprisoned or placed under house arrest', which accompanies multiple 'allegations of torture' carried out by those in power (Taylor, 2011: online).

The occupation and disruption of 'official' public spaces through protest actions has been embraced by FEMEN: their actions have been located within large public squares, polling stations and outside of a number of governmental buildings and at political rallies. These include their protests outside of the Crimean Parliament building in Simferopol, Ukraine, in 2014, the San Basilica in Rome, Italy in 2011, as well as their protest in Minsk, Belarus as discussed earlier. Most recently in 2017, these have also included disrupting the rallies of the French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen by running topless onstage with flowers, and in April the same year, protesting at a polling station during the first round of voting in the country. On the other hand, FEMEN's protests have also occupied decidedly 'private' spaces such as the catwalk at Paris Fashion Week.

Paris Fashion Week as an event in itself, as well as the individual designer's showcases which make up Fashion Week as a whole, are undoubtedly private, commercial spaces<sup>9</sup>. Here the term 'private' in relation to space, can be understood simply as the antithesis to Hannah Arendt's conception of the 'public realm'. In *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), Arendt outlines the public realm as that which 'is common to all of us' (1998: 52). In this sense, the public realm can be understood as that which is seen, or perceived by everybody, which constitutes reality. On the other hand, it can be understood that private spaces are not generally created for political purposes.

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<sup>9</sup> According to *FashionWeekOnline.com*, for Fashion Weeks in Milan, London, New York and Paris, '[a]ttendance rules (and opportunities) vary by location, and are generally based on your connections to the industry' (*FashionWeekOnline.com*, 2018: online)

Whilst politics can, and invariably do, take place within events such as Fashion Week, these cannot easily be understood as public, or political spaces, as emphasised by the swift removal of FEMEN's activists by the catwalks security guards. As such, spaces such as the catwalk can be broadly considered private, in the sense that they have excluded certain people and discourses in their construction and organisation.<sup>10</sup> This private space however, is potentially contested as FEMEN locate with their actions within them, as will be further examined in Chapter Two.

#### CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Through an examination of the dramaturgical strategies employed by FEMEN in protest, this chapter has demonstrated the notions of contradictions present within their use of the topless female body. In doing so, it has begun to touch upon notions of female spectacle and the relationship between protest and space, both public and private. The following chapters will begin to consider these contradictions in relation to their relationship and use of space, private space, and how this is affected their dramaturgical strategies of protest. In doing so, it will draw upon the political understandings of action and the spaces of appearance as outlined by Hannah Arendt.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth briefly mentioning, that public spaces are not always 'freely' public, and can be bound by the same exclusions outlined here in relation to definitions of private space. This is evident in the public space outside of the KGB offices in Minsk, and the repercussions the group, and others, have faced after protesting within it.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### FEMEN, ACTION AND SPACES OF APPEARANCE

This chapter will examine the potential political ramifications and effects of space in relation to FEMEN's protests. In doing so, it will turn to aspects of political philosophy outlined by Hannah Arendt. Whilst Kershaw and Schechner can be argued to provide a fairly limited exploration of space within their analysis of protest events, which suggests that protest occur within the literal boundaries of each protest, and are thus over once the event itself ends (Schechner, 1993; Kershaw, 1999), this chapter will explore the ways in which Arendt's understanding of 'action' can lead to a deeper analysis of the relationship between FEMEN's protests and space.

#### FEMEN: STUNTING AND STUNTED

Regarding their protest actions, criticisms of FEMEN from within academia have suggested that the group were 'simply [organising] publicity stunts' that do little more than ultimately 'capture the attention of the mainstream media' (O'Keefe, 2014: online). Certainly, the term stunt is employed, in this instance by O'Keefe, with implicitly negative connotations, and this feeling is echoed throughout the mediatised responses to FEMEN. Within her discussion of FEMEN's protest at Paris Fashion Week, Bertie Brandes writes,

I'm not entirely convinced at how effective the stunt will be. FEMEN's argument that a sexualised and aggressively sexist media are consistently undermining genuine female beauty and femininity is incredibly important. The problem is: FEMEN's tried and-tested methods will not force much of a shift in established assumptions. (Brandes, 2013: online)

Although at the same time acknowledging that their message might be an important one, *stunt* is used here to ultimately devalue the protest form FEMEN have generated.

Whilst stunt has been mostly used to emphasise the way in which the group have apparently '[r]oped in the international media with its stunts', the term itself can be considered duplicitous in meaning (Rohozinksa, 2012: online). According to Russo, stunt can refer to both *stunting*, a 'model of female exceptionalism', as well as *stunted*, in the form of the 'doubled, dwarfed [...] creatures of the sideshow' (Russo, 1994: 22-23). The latter is an image which subsequently stands in for the 'cultural presentation of the female body as monstrous or lacking' (Russo, 1994: 22-23). According to Russo, stunts bear a 'special relationship to groups who are exceptional or abnormal in relation to "normal activity"' (Russo, 1994: 19). In her analysis of *stunting* in particular, Russo draws upon the example of the exceptional activities of female stunt pilots, such as Amelia Earhart (Russo, 1994: 22-23). These exceptional women, alongside their exceptional activities, occupy specific positions of risk, which can be seen literally in the actions they undertake.

For Earhart this included the risk involved in the aerobatic feats she completed during her lifetime, whilst for FEMEN this involves potential illegality of their disruption and occupation of private spaces through protest. This notion of risk is also present considering their position in relation to 'normal activity' for women. As discussed in the previous chapter, FEMEN's use of the topless female body in protest, suggests a 'loss of boundaries' in relation to 'appropriate' behaviour and appearance for women. As such, FEMEN can be seen to embody this notion of *stunting* as a model of female exceptionalism; their constant use of the topless female body effectively repeating this 'model' through protest.

Stunts, as they are characterised by Russo, are described as a useful ‘tactic for groups [in] certain risky situation[s] in which strategy is not possible’ (1994: 22). Generally, tactics can be understood as planned actions or events which aim to accomplish a specific end. In this sense, tactics can form part of a larger, sometimes more complicated, strategy, but can be considered singular planned actions designed to achieve an end goal. With regard to FEMEN, protest stunts are in part employed as a specific tactic, designed to garner media attention and documentation after the usually fleeting event has ended. However, it can be argued that these are also employed in order to generate new spaces, for new ‘freedoms’, through the use of the female body within these protest stunts, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

As mentioned, FEMEN’s protests regularly occupy restricted spaces and events, located within literally ‘risky’ positions, these include but are not limited to; the catwalk, waxwork museum and political rallies. In practice, the group do not possess the necessary time to develop and execute a complicated plan of action within these spaces. Thus FEMEN’s protests have become performances for the camera, for the mass media, which according to them must relay their intentions and message (whatever this may be at the time) to a much wider audience. FEMEN’s protest at Fashion Week for instance, is intended to ensure that whilst FEMEN remain on the catwalk for all but a few seconds, the focus on the journalists and photographers are sufficiently diverted from the models to the activists within those few brief moments. As the group have stated, ‘[w]ithout the press, we can do nothing. If we’re not in the news, *it’s as if our action hasn’t even happened*’ (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 45, emphasis added). To suggest FEMEN employ tactics such as these, is not to say that they enter into protests without any form of strategy whatsoever, but that



this has been affected by the contexts and restraints of the spaces they occupy, particularly private or restricted spaces.

#### RISK, CARNIVAL AND PROTEST

Russo contends that risk itself 'is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather a *condition of possibility* produced, in effect, by the normalisation of the body' (Russo, 1994: 10 -11, emphasis added). She states that the discourse of risk taking [...] is intended to introduce the grotesque into [a] space which "leaves room for error" (Russo, 1994: 11). Within the space of the catwalk, the risk FEMEN encounter can be argued to evoke this condition of possibility, related to the 'normalisation' that Russo suggests. As examined in the previous chapter, FEMEN are specifically positioned at odds with the appearance and behaviours of the women who usually occupy that space, that of the models. Within this protest, FEMEN can be argued to be *stunting*, as the behaviours and activities undertaken by FEMEN's activists prove to be *exceptional* in relation to a norm. In doing so, they are attempting to draw upon the notion of 'possibility' in order to introduce 'a new interpretation of nudity' as they have argued their aim to be (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2012: online).

The *room for error* that Russo describes (produced through the risky activities defined in this instance as stunts) echoes the liminal spaces of protest and carnival outlined by Schechner and Kershaw. This similarity may stem from the fact that, like Schechner and Kershaw, Russo is drawing upon theories of the carnivalesque via Mikhail Bakhtin. Thus, notions of stunting, carnival and risk are connected here through the protests undertaken by FEMEN; like the liminal spaces produced through carnival, stunts can be seen to generate spaces imbued with 'possibility' (Russo, 1994: 11). Though the spaces generated by FEMEN

through protest and their bodies, are not quite the same as those produced through carnival.

Carnival and protest events may produce 'room' for bodily and social error, outlined in terms of their potential liminality by Schechner and Kershaw. Thus, the freedoms afforded to participants within these spaces ebbs and flows according to the event taking place, but ends once it does. However, in most instances, FEMEN are not performing within already occurring protest events or carnivals. Instead, they are producing the protest events on their own terms, through their own bodies, which draw from notions of the carnivalesque outlined by Russo. In the instances where FEMEN are creating the carnival themselves (via their bodies), there necessarily exists more risk, drawn both from the legalities of operating within a given space, and the consequences of the topless female body operating within that space. If and when FEMEN have joined already occurring marches or protests, their topless presence is less publicly 'alarming', given the expectations of social and political freedoms afforded to protest and carnival.

However, it is not entirely true to say that the freedoms usually afforded to protest and carnival do not occur within the protests undertaken by FEMEN. Whilst their toplessness may lead to their arrest on occasion, FEMEN were acquitted of charges of 'sexual exhibition' in court, after their case regarding the protest against International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn was officially dropped. This action, which took place in 2015 in Lille, France, saw the topless FEMEN activists confront the car in which Strauss-Kahn was being driven to court, as he was to stand trial for 'aggravated pimping' (Agence France-Presse, 2016: online). In this instance, the understanding that their toplessness took place within a political act of protest, wherein the usual social boundaries

determining 'normal' behaviour are suspended, was enough to see the group acquitted (Agence France-Presse, 2016: online). Nonetheless, there exists a complicated form of longevity in relation to FEMEN's protests, which stems both from their performance of protest and relationship to their subsequent documentation. Whilst the liminal spaces of protest and carnival may again revert once they have ended, as suggested by Schechner, FEMEN seem to be able to (consistently and repeatedly) reopen these spaces. As such, it is worth considering how and where this longevity exists and functions, and how this might alter understandings of the protest strategies employed by FEMEN.

#### 'OUR MISSION IS PROTEST'

FEMEN are known for their toplessness, but also for their consistent protesting; the group are somewhat relentless in their performance of protest. From carrying out this research, it seems apparent that FEMEN have protested consistently, and often, since they first formed in 2008. As there remains, at the time of writing, no exhaustive or robust timeline of their protests, it seems impossible to say for sure how many have been undertaken by the group in total. Looking at the 'News' feed on *FEMEN.org*, updated by the group themselves, for the month July 2017, it appears that the group carried out at least two protests, one in Hamburg, Germany, and the other at the Ukrainian Presidential Office in Kiev, Ukraine. This seems to be indicative of FEMEN's activity between 2011 and 2017, as the group carry out, at the very least, two protests every month.

As their protests are over so quickly, those who were not present at the event itself (where physical audiences are often small) rely on the later documentation. This documentation is mostly published within the media, where the differing accounts of the protest can vary from actual events, or on the official websites and social media pages

controlled by the group. Having said this, FEMEN's first official website, *FEMEN.com*, is no longer available to view, since they apparently removed the site sometime after switching to *FEMEN.org* in January 2015. As such, the earlier posts which outlined when, where, and why protests from 2008 until early 2015 took place, no longer exist or are at least now very difficult to find without attempting to find archived versions of these pages. Whilst it can be at times difficult to navigate, there still exists a large archive of documentation relating to FEMEN and their protests. A simple internet search for 'FEMEN Fashion Week' on a search engine such as *Google.com*, reveals pages of relevant results in the form of images, articles, and videos of the protest.

FEMEN's manifesto states that their 'mission is protest' (FEMEN, 2014: vii). If this is the case, that their 'mission' is simply protest in itself, what might this mean in practice? If it is simply that they are actively *doing protests*, the group seem to be successful (at least given the rate at which they carry out these protests). However, FEMEN have also stated that if these protests do not appear in the media, 'it's as if [it] hasn't even happened' (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 45). This statement suggests that their 'mission is protest' but that it also goes beyond this, that it is also the longevity of protest, or the *reappearance of protest*.

The analysis of FEMEN in this thesis has thus far focused on the initial protest 'event'; which here means the initial, physical, instance of protest performed by the group. However, it is clear that FEMEN's protest strategy and aim encompasses far more than this initial event, given their emphasis on its subsequent mediatisation. As such, by drawing upon concepts of 'action' and the 'space of appearance' outlined by Arendt, we may begin

to examine the breadth of the political space generated by FEMEN's protest and what affect this may have on our understanding of the group's strategies.

#### ARENDT AND ACTION

Speaking at the TEDx Kalamata Conference in June 2015, Inna Shevchenko stated that 'being active and taking a political position [...] is the first step towards big changes' (2015: online). Alongside their protest 'mission', this view of 'being active', or more specifically taking action, is evocative of Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of 'action' and the 'public realm' (Arendt, 1998). As such, this articulation of action may be employed to generate a deeper understanding of the relationship between FEMEN's protests, politics and space.

According to Arendt, 'action' is characterised as a specific kind of human activity. Whereas 'labour' is activity deemed necessary to human life (such as generating food, water, and shelter), and 'work' is outlined as the means to a physical end (such as the production of a material object), 'action' she states, is the activity which 'goes on directly between men and without the intermediary of things or matter' (Arendt, 1998: 7). Here, action is rooted in the notion of 'natality'; that new things are provoked, or 'born' (Arendt, 1998: 8).<sup>11</sup> Whilst labour and work may also generate newness, natality is specific to action due to its 'boundlessness'. Whilst the newness that may occur as a result of the activities of labour and work, these are set out beforehand, and thus anticipated. As action must go on between people, Arendt suggests that 'no matter what its specific content, [it] always establishes [new] relationships (1998: 190), and thus she states only the 'unexpected can be expected from [human action] (1998: 178). Thus, the scope of newness afforded to action

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<sup>11</sup> The etymological definition of natality is usually associated with human birth rates, but is here employed to evoke the notion of new beginnings that can be created at birth.

can be characterised by its 'inherent unpredictability' (Arendt, 1998: 191). As such, the possibilities afforded to action can seem boundless, or at least be said to contain the potential for boundlessness.

According to Arendt, 'revolutions are the only political event which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning' (Arendt, 1963/2006, 21). In this statement, Arendt echoes the notions of liminality within carnival and protest suggested by Schechner and Kershaw, in that these events attempt to generate new beginnings or freedoms, or at least *new spaces* for these to occur. For Arendt, the notion of 'revolution' evokes feelings central to the condition of natality; 'the possibility of beginning anew as the inherent potential of human action' (Grumley, 1998:54)

As examined in Chapter One, FEMEN have argued that that their toplessness in protest aims to generate 'new interpretation[s] of nudity' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2012: online). By producing carnival through their bodies, FEMEN may be able to generate conditions possibility linked to stunts and carnival, creating a potential space for the 'newness' that FEMEN refer to in relation to their bodies. However, it is not enough to say that protest events can be considered 'action' in relation to their supposed liminality, as Arendt goes beyond the spatially which is suggested by Kershaw and Schechner.

#### FEMEN, ACTION AND SPEECH

Arendt states that action should always be accompanied by 'speech' and that the two activities are inherently intertwined. In this instance, 'speech' can supposedly relate to various forms of communicative interaction, which can be either written or spoken, but that necessarily go on *between people*. In *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), Arendt suggests

that speech is required to give meaning to action and to reveal the subject, the actor. In doing so, she contends that speechless actions would no longer be action [...] because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words' (Arendt, 1998: 179, emphasis added).

It appears that FEMEN share in Arendt's conviction; whilst they emphasise action through protest, they contend that without the 'speech' which accompanies and follows the action through mediatisation it seems as though it 'hasn't even happened' (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: 45). Significantly, Inna Shevchenko's TEDx Talk was entitled 'I Will Not Stop Speaking Out Loud', which intended to reflect her will to continue her activism as a means of 'speaking out loud' and speaking up for others through protest (2015, online). In this, Shevchenko expresses her thanks at being afforded a slightly lengthier platform to physically speak; she states 'being a political activist, carrying out direct topless protest, I usually have an opportunity to express my ideas in a few seconds, just before being arrested' (2015, online).

Another clear way in which speech accompanies action and 'give meaning' to FEMEN's protests, is through the slogans painted onto their bare chests, for instance 'fashion dictat-error' and 'model don't go to brothel' which were used during their protest at Fashion Week. These slogans are strategically situated on the body, rather than on placards, to ensure they would appear in the media images of protest as discussed in Chapter One. It seems that FEMEN did not wish to 'lose' the speech which accompanied their protests in order to keep their own 'meaning' in the action, as these images appear and circulate within subsequent mediatisation.

Within a series of protests staged by the group in the run up to the Euro 2012 Football Championship, FEMEN joined the queue for photographs with the Championship Trophy as it made a publicity tour around the hosting cities within Poland and Ukraine. At the trophy's stop in Dnipropetrovsk, Shevchenko 'managed to climb on stage [...] revealing the words "Fuck Euro 2012"' painted onto her bare torso' before being quickly removed by security guards (Harding, 2012: online). This slogan reflected FEMEN's argument that the increased tourism drawn to Ukraine by the Championship, co-hosted by Ukraine and Poland that year, would only exacerbate the country's already 'rampant sex industry' and reinforce the sexualised view of Ukrainian women as highly 'available' to visiting tourists (Harding, 2012: online). Alternatively, within FEMEN's protest at the waxwork museum discussed at the very start of this thesis, the slogan 'grab patriarchy by the balls' directly challenges the sexist language and behaviour perpetrated by President Trump.

In these instances, FEMEN use slogans in an attempt to relate each action to their message, which will hopefully appear and reappear in the subsequent mediatization of each protest. In doing so, this speech connects the female body to an ideology, outlined and reiterated by FEMEN, which aims to disrupt and alter understandings of female toplessness. Whilst the verbal forms of speech within FEMEN's protest actions are often lost in its mediatization, the inscribed slogans (with their strategic bodily positioning) remain, and as their toplessness takes a prominent position within the subsequent documentation, so does this text. Furthermore, as these slogans are inscribed onto the bare breast of FEMEN's activists, and are repeatedly so, these slogans (in their various iterations) have come to represent the ideological position taken by FEMEN, specifically associated with their use of the topless female body in protest.



Whilst speech can be said to give meaning to action, at the same time, speech can be seen as an action itself, and acts can be performed through speech as it also suggested by the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin (1975). If these apparently simple slogans were to be taken out of context, they are forms of constatives, statements which do not actively *do* anything in themselves. This term is taken from J. L. Austin's characterisation of the performativity of speech acts. In doing so he outlines *constatives* as direct statements, whereas *performatives* are speech acts which 'perform an act' in their being said (Austin, 1975: 101). However, Austin's own definitions were outlined specifically in relation to direct speech, as evident within examples such as saying 'I do' during a wedding ceremony. This analysis employs a simple definition of Austin's performative utterances, as that which *does something*.

#### SPACES OF APPEARANCE

As Arendt suggests, action 'corresponds to the human condition of plurality', in which 'plurality' is defined as 'the fact that men, not Man<sup>12</sup>, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (1998: 7-8). Therefore action and speech, as they necessarily *go on between people*, are the ways in which men distinguish themselves instead of merely being distinct; *they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other*' (1998: 176, emphasis added).

In this characterisation of action, the term 'appearance' is significant, as it suggests that speech and action generate a form of space in which we subsequently are able appear to one another. Within Arendt's analysis, she states it is the Greeks who 'expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst Arendt doesn't seem to be making a specifically gendered statement here, in her use of the term 'Man' she follows a tradition of employing a male pronoun to represent the species, both male and female.

proper location almost any time and anywhere' (Arendt, 1998: 198). This space, which occurs between people through speech and action, is the 'public realm, the potential *space of appearance*' (Arendt, 1998: 199 – 200, emphasis added). This 'appearingness' is outlined as the nature of being alive, by appearing to and among others through speech and action (Arendt, 1978: 21). As such, the space of appearance is not necessarily a given, physical, space. Rather it is a form of spatial metaphor employed by Arendt, within which 'appearance' denotes the 'widest sense of the word [...] the space I appear to others as they appear to me' (1998: 198 - 199).

Austin's definition of performative utterances seems to refer to more literal forms of speech, that of spoken word, than we may consider Arendt's definition of speech to be. As such, the terms *speech* and *words*, or text, are somewhat conflated within this analysis. However, the term speech is employed here in order to characterise various different form of speech that might occur in and around protest itself. This draws upon Arendt's notion of speech as it goes on *between people*, through various modes of communicative interaction, which is not necessarily limited to 'literal' speech which occurs within the moment of protest. Rather, the action can be understood as the ways in which FEMEN's protest *appears and reappears*.

In this sense, the moment of protest itself, the subsequent mediatisation, the documentation through academic criticism, the images and videos of protest, may all evoke this notion of appearance, forming the speech that Arendt refers to. Returning to Austin's notion of performative utterances then, it can be argued that what speech may *do* in this context of examining protest, is potentially extend our understanding of constitutes the protest 'action', in relation to *what is appearing, how it appears, and where*.

For two years in a row, in 2012 and 2013, FEMEN activists scaled the gates at the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> annual meetings of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland. During both actions, these topless women reached the rooftops of the outposts at the gates of the venue, standing just out of reach of the security guards below. In 2013, the activists also waved flares above their heads, colouring the space surrounding them a bright pink. In this instance, the protest event ended when the protesters were carried, dragged and pushed through gates, and according to media reports, ‘detained’ by Swiss police (Gates, 2013: online).

As the WEF is a relatively high profile, international event, FEMEN’s protests were widely covered within the media in the months which followed. These range from articles which were formed solely of images of the protest, ‘Women’s Rights activists protest at Davos – in pictures’ (Guardian, 2013: online), to those which mention the protest within a larger criticism of the group as a whole, ‘Put Your Shirts Back On: Why Femen is Wrong’ (Kolsy, 2013: online). Whilst FEMEN are in seemingly control of the form in which the protest event itself takes (although restricted by location and security), their reliance on the mass media to generate the bulk of their documentation, can mean that they are not necessarily in control of what is appearing and where it appears in this context.

That being said, FEMEN’s protest actions do not necessarily *create* the space of appearance, which according to Arendt is the given nature of human life, but rather it can be seen to magnify this space, which is particularly evident when the spaces they occupy through protest are private or restricted. Within the space of the Paris catwalk in 2013 for instance, the nature of appearance is already heightened, given the framework of the

fashion industry itself, but as mentioned, this location is not readily understood as a public space. As such, FEMEN's disruption of the catwalk, can be understood as an 'antagonistic disruption of the ordinary sequence of things', which challenges that which is appearing, and who can appear within this space (Honig, 1995: 146).

As such, FEMEN's protest blurs the boundaries of private and public space through action, by bringing into the space of appearance in ways it was not initially intended. In doing so, FEMEN are subverting the understandings of the female body within this space, and within the fashion industry in particular. This subversion does not stem from their use of the topless female body alone; there exists a great deal of accepted female nudity on the catwalk, which includes the Nina Ricci show that FEMEN disrupted, as bare breasts can be seen through items of sheer clothing. Rather, they are challenging female nudity in its commodified form through protest, effectively subverting who 'wields' the female body, how and why (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

This is in again echoed within FEMEN's protest at the World Economic Forum in 2013. The WEF, is it argued, is 'one of the world's largest and most high profile annual gathering of business and word leaders' It describes itself as being 'committed to improving the state of the world [through] Public-Private Cooperation' (World Economic Forum, 2016: online). Having said this, the WEF has been repeatedly criticised for the lack of women in attendance at the event.<sup>13</sup> Whilst increasing the number of women at the forum does not necessarily mean that women's interests are being properly represented by any means,

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of their first action in 2012, the number of women in attendance was at 17%, which dropped the following year when FEMEN also returned, to 15%. As of 2016, it is up to 18%, still only a 1% increase in relation to 2012 (Zarya, 2016: online). Early reports in relation to the WEF in 2017 suggest that this figure has risen to 20% of women in attendance (Martinson, 2017: online).

FEMEN's action, as it constructed of the moment of protest at the gates of the building and its further appearance elsewhere, attempts to highlight the marginal position of women within an organisation which is apparently 'accountable to all parts of society' but which has repeatedly failed to meet its own quotas of the representation of women.<sup>14</sup> During the 2013 protest, FEMEN accused world leaders present at the World Economic Forum of 'imitating concern about the fates of women' (Gates, 2013: online)

#### POLITICAL SPACES, PROMISES AND FORGIVENESS

When 'in concert', Arendt suggests that speech and action reveal their potential to 'establish new relations and create new realities' (Arendt, 1998: 178 -9). If action creates relationships between people, however fragmentary or brief, it can seem easy to contend that the spaces of appearance generated through these relationships are necessarily political, discursive spaces (particularly when considering action in relation to protest). For FEMEN, the contention that protest creates space wherein new connections and conversations are inherently generated seems invaluable. Nonetheless, FEMEN's apparent appearance within a form of public realm generated through action, is not necessarily the same thing as representation, which is also the case for the WEF itself<sup>15</sup>.

The public realm which Arendt describes is unlike the notion of the 'public sphere' as it is characterised by Jurgen Habermas, as a 'body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest" (Habermas in Fraser, 1990: 58). In Nancy

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<sup>14</sup> In 2011 the WEF introduced a quota for its 'strategic partners' in which they were required to bring one woman for every four men. Whilst it seems that they may finally have met this quota of 20% in 2017, according to journalist Jane Martinson, this quota simply meant that some partners 'chose to pay for only four places' (Martinson, 2017: online).

<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, I have not been able to find evidence to support that their protests have led to a change in politics which is reflected in governmental policies or law.

Fraser's rethinking of Habermas, she highlights the way in which the 'idea' of the public sphere 'designate[s] an institutional mechanism for "rationalizing" political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) its citizenry' (Fraser, 1990: 59). Fraser argues that this form of public sphere would also attempt to enact a 'specific kind of discursive interaction [...] an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters [and] discussion was to be open and accessible to all' (Fraser, 1990: 59, emphasis added).

However, Fraser states that the idea of the public sphere in political and state interests has never been fully realised in western democracies. This is because the public sphere has been 'premised on a social order in which the state was sharply differentiated from the newly privatized market economy' (Fraser, 1990: 59). This position enacted a 'clear separation of "society" and state that supposed to underpin a form of public discussion that excluded "private interests"' (Fraser, 1990: 59). As well as this, Fraser argues that 'despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility, that official public sphere rested on [...] was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions' (Fraser, 1990: 59, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Fraser states that within the public sphere the 'ideas of deliberation and the common good [are conflated] by assuming that deliberation must be deliberation about the common good' (1990: 71). But in doing so, deliberation itself is subsequently 'framed from the standpoint of an all-encompassing "we"' (Fraser, 1990: 71). This is evident within the criticisms of FEMEN which accuse the group of speaking for, and in place of, marginalised groups of women, without acknowledging criticism or response from these groups (Nagarajan, 2013: online). Thus, in challenge to Kershaw, considering FEMEN's

protests as forms of action, should not immediately categorise the spaces of appearance that may arise, as inherently discursive or political spaces.

The notion of the public sphere criticised by Fraser, is comparable to the ancient Greek understanding of *political space*, articulated by Arendt as a space specifically constructed *before* action can take place within it. Arendt states that to the Greeks, 'legislating and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because men "act like craftsmen"' (1998: 195). In this case, she states that the 'result of their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end, supposedly for the common good (1998: 195). In this sense, political activity is seemingly constructed as a means to a recognizable, predetermined end, rather than as a goal in themselves.

Arendt contends that, textually, the action is 'divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement [...] by seeing it through' (1998: 189). She outlines the Greek terms which relate to action, as *archein* (to begin) and *prattein* (to achieve or finish), also corresponding to the Latin *agere* (to set in motion) and *gerere* (to bear, manage) (1998: 189). These terms are connected in their definitions, but according to Arendt 'their usage is very similar too' (1998: 189). Arendt states that, [i]n both cases the [words] that originally designated only the second part of action, its achievement [...] became the accepted word for action in general', implicitly placing emphasis on action which 'achieves' its goal or is carried out successfully, rather than on simply 'beginning' or undertaking the action in the first place (Arendt, 1998: 189).

However, action, as it is differentiated from work and labour, is described by Arendt as the 'political activity par excellence' (1998: 9). Rather than being solely intended as the means to an end, she states that '[t]o act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative,

to begin [...] to set something in motion' (Arendt, 1998: 177). This basic understanding of action as a beginning, recalls FEMEN's own mission statement examined earlier within the chapter, which simply is *to protest* (FEMEN & Ackerman, 2014: vii). However, action is bound by its unpredictability and that which Arendt calls the 'predicament of irreversibility' (Arendt, 1998: 237).

As the results of action may be inherently unknowable, or unpredictable, Arendt contends that the 'remedy [...] for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to *make and keep promises*', which includes the act of forgiveness (1998: 212-213, emphasis added). As she states, 'forgiving is an action that guarantees the continuity for action, for beginning anew' (2009, 59). In this sense, whilst action may produce outcomes that are unpredictable, as long as there is the capacity for human promises or forgiveness, action and therefore natality, may continue.

#### CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter contends that FEMEN's protests can be considered forms of action, rather than a form of work or labour. Within this understanding, it can be argued that everything that surrounds the 'event' forms the action. It extends beyond the moment of protest, to take into account the ripples it produces (the academic criticism, media coverage, images and videos etc.). In this sense, the spatiality and temporality of our understanding of the protest action is potentially extended, as the action can appear and reappear long after the event itself is over.

Whilst Kershaw and Schechner suggest that the liminal spaces of protest are connected to the occupation of public space as long as this lasts, Arendt suggests that these



spaces can arise through speech and action, within the spaces of appearance 'no matter where they happen to be' (Arendt, 1998: 198). As such, we must consider the ways in which FEMEN evoke the conditions of natality that Arendt describes; considering the instances of 'newness' (intended or otherwise) that FEMEN's protest actions may produce, and what comes next. In doing so, the following chapter will discuss Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996) in order to offer a conceptual model upon which to further discuss how FEMEN's protest disrupt hegemonic and binary notions of space.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### THIRDSPACE, MEDIA AND FEMALE TOPLESSNESS

This chapter aims to examine further how FEMEN's protest can be considered 'action', and the ways in which doing so may challenge modernist binary understandings of space, politics and the female body. As such, it will draw from Edward Soja's concept of 'thirdspace' (1996). Soja's thirdspace offers another perspective, akin to Arendt's notion of the spaces of appearance, but which also challenges binary understandings of space.

In *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), Soja argues that the 'mainstream spatial or geographical imagination has, at least for the past century, revolved primarily around a *dual mode of thinking about space*' (Soja, 1996: 10, emphasis added). In this, the dual mode of thinking is located in, and between, 'Firstspace' and 'Secondspace', otherwise outlined as the 'real' and 'imagined' spaces (Soja, 1996: 10). The firstspace is 'fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped' (Soja, 1996: 10) In other words, firstspace is understood simply as 'real', physical spaces (Soja, 1996: 10). Secondspace, on the other hand, is 'conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental and cognitive forms' (Soja, 1996: 10). Secondspace, can thus be outlined in terms of the 'mental' or representational space (1996: 10).

Taking fashion week as an example, the catwalk itself, as a physical location, can be understood as firstspace. Alongside this, the cultural understanding and construction of the fashion industry, in all its 'thoughtful re-presentations', is the secondspace. As such, the

firstspace of FEMEN's protest at Fashion Week, is again the catwalk itself, whereas the secondspace can be located in the (mostly mediatised) representations of, and responses to, the protest event after the fact.

These 'material and mental spaces of traditional dualism' form the basis of Soja's spatial theory of 'Thirdspace' which draws from the spatial dualism of firstspace and secondspace, but which 'extends well beyond them in scope, substance and meaning' (Soja, 1996: 11). In doing so, Soja suggests that thirdspace attempts to create 'another mode of thinking about space' (1996: 11). In this sense, both Soja's thirdspace and Arendt's notion of action, can be seen to share a similar spatiality and temporality, one which may go beyond the material spaces of the initial 'event'. Within Arendt's understanding, the communicative processes of action and speech generate spaces of appearance, through which the material space may be extended.

#### 'THIRDING'

According to Soja, 'the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or' emphasised within the realms of firstspace and secondspace, is a critical spatial strategy outlined as 'thirling' (Soja, 1996: 5). In other words, the process of thirling intends to introduce a 'critical "other-than" choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness' (Soja, 1996: 61). In doing so, Soja contends that 'any attempt to confine thought and political action to only alternatives [is countered] by interjecting anOther set of choices' (1996: 5). As such, Soja contends this process is a form of 'restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from two opposing categories to open new alternatives' (Soja, 1996: 5).

Within his conceptualisation of critical thirding, Soja draws significantly from Henri Lefebvre, a French sociologist and philosopher known for his critique of the social production of space and everyday life (Lefebvre, 1974). He states that '[w]hen ever faced with [...] binarized categories' such as 'subject-object, material-mental', Lefebvre attempted to 'crack them open by introducing an-Other term' (Soja, 1996: 60). In doing, Lefebvre presented a 'third possibility or "moment"' within these binary categories of understanding (Soja, 1996: 60). In this sense, Soja's characterisation of thirdspace and its potential to generate 'new alternatives' evokes the condition of natality within Arendt's action. As such, thirdspace can be examined in relation to FEMEN, to outline the way in which their relationship to space might challenge binary understandings of space, politics and the female body in protest.

#### PRIVATE/PUBLIC/THIRD SPACE

FEMEN's abrupt invasion of the catwalk during Paris Fashion Week (2013) can be seen to present an 'other-than' choice in the spatial understandings of event which is, in part, further complicated through its subsequent mediatisation<sup>16</sup> (Soja, 1996: 61). There is no doubt that the protest stunt gained significant media attention, this is in part due to the high profile nature of the event itself as well as FEMEN's use of female toplessness. FEMEN's strategic and deliberate choice to embrace risk and illegality within their protests, inevitably mean that these stunts do not last for more than a few minutes, or even seconds. This suggests that FEMEN do not (or rather are not able to) occupy the material realms of firstspace for any significant length of time. As such, FEMEN partly rely on the mass media to

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<sup>16</sup> This complication is not necessarily limited to its mediatisation, but this can be observed as one of the clearest examples of 'appearance' beyond the initial protest event.

document and relay each protest, to a much wider audience.<sup>17</sup> At the time of writing, an online article about the fashion week protest posted on *Independent.co.uk*, suggests it has 4,000 shares via *Facebook*, *Twitter* and email (Saul, 2013: online). Whereas a video of the protest on the popular video sharing platform *YouTube* has over 46,000 views (InformOverload, 2013: online).

As an apparently private space, the catwalk is subsequently 'publicised' in ways which were not intended by those who were arguably in charge of that space. In doing so, protest (as it can be understood as a form of action) presents the private to the public on terms, at least partly, determined by FEMEN and through this act of (physical) trespass. As such, their protest stunt can be seen to enact, or generate, a 'moment' of spatial possibility within the private space of the catwalk. This is not to say that the space has suddenly become 'public', but rather it can be argued to be incorporated into the 'public realm' that Arendt argues can be generated through action.

In her analysis of the protests which took place in Tahrir Square, Egypt, in 2011, Judith Butler contends that the 'street scenes', or moments of protest, 'become politically potent only when we have a visual and audible version of the scene' (2011: online). She states that in these instances, the media does not merely report on the scene, but 'is part of the scene and action' (Butler, 2011: online). For Butler, protesting bodies of the activists are 'linked fundamentally to what communication devices and technologies are doing when they 'report' on what is happening' (Butler, 2011: online). As such, Butler contends that 'if it were not spanning both locations – indeed, multiple locations – it would not be the scene it

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<sup>17</sup> The extensive mediatisation of FEMEN can inevitably mean that the group are not entirely in control of *what is relayed through the media, and/or who sees it and where it appears*. This will be examined later in the chapter.

is' (Butler, 2011, emphasis added). This mediatisation and the dialogues which stem from this, should not simply be considered as 'documentation' of an action, but as a significant part of the protest itself.

The protest is not then simply split between their material and mediatisation locations. Rather, it is located within the spaces of appearance, as these emerge within the communicative processes surrounding the protest (and which forms the 'action'). This can be found in, but is not limited, to its mediatisation. Mostly significantly, the spaces of appearance comprise of dialogue, communication *between people*, which given the widespread and prolific use of the internet and social media, may occur beyond face-to-face contact. As a group, FEMEN have embraced and exploited this understanding. Thus, in relation to FEMEN, their relationship to space and action, serves to generate a 'third possibility' which Soja outlines within the understanding of thirdspace, subsequently disrupting the boundaries and distinctions between first and secondspaces.

#### THIRDSPEACE, PROTEST AND THE BODY

These critical spatial processes are echoed within the series of stunts staged by FEMEN in Ukraine during the run up to the Euro 2012 Football Championships. As briefly mentioned, the Championship Trophy made a publicity tour around the hosting cities within Poland and Ukraine, and football fans were given the opportunity to queue for a photograph with the trophy itself. These were well organised, commercially driven events, aimed at promoting the Championship and encouraging the public within the host countries to support, and subsequently attend, the eventual matches. Whilst located in public spaces, these were privately controlled events, wherein the flocking public were highly regulated

through the use of a large (private) security presence, carefully cordoned off areas, and other methods of crowd control/organisation.

That year, FEMEN's activists also joined the queues for photographs, waiting until they were positioned next to the cup itself before removing their tops and attempting to seize it (See Figure 3.2). At the trophy's stop in Dnipropetrovsk, Shevchenko 'managed to climb on stage [...] revealing the words "Fuck Euro 2012"' painted onto her bare torso' before being quickly removed by security guards (Harding, 2012: online). Like the protest at Fashion Week, this stunt (or series of stunts) is an act of trespass within private property.

Within both this and the fashion week protest, there is also a clear connection made between the spaces occupied through protest and understandings of the female body which FEMEN aim to challenge through their activism. In explanations published by FEMEN on their website<sup>18</sup> used at the time of the Euro 2012 protests, FEMEN stated that the stadium itself was surrounded by 'a network of brothels, built specifically for Euro 2012' (FEMEN, 2012: online). Thus they argued that the increased tourism drawn to Ukraine by the Championship, co-hosted by Ukraine and Poland that year, would only exacerbate the country's already 'rampant sex industry' and reinforce the sexualised view of Ukrainian women as highly 'available' to visiting tourists<sup>19</sup> (Harding, 2012: online). This message can

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<sup>18</sup> At the time this was a LiveJournal page (femen.livejournal.com), which is still available to view online but which is no longer updated by the group.

<sup>19</sup> In a report (commissioned and funded by UEFA in 2012) examining discourses surrounding prostitution within the Euro 2012 football championship, it is suggested that 'FEMEN [have] been taken in by media hype that has developed' in relation to connections between rises in prostitution and the championship (Schuster, Sülzle & Zimowska, 2010: 6). It suggests that FEMEN's 'views on prostitution and AIDS prevention [was] unfounded and simplistic' though recognised FEMEN's ability at the time to attract significant media attention, suggesting that 'FEMEN nevertheless manages to dominate the international media landscape where UEFA EURO 2012 and prostitution are concerned' (Schuster, Sülzle & Zimowska, 2010, 6). This report suggested that links to the championship and a rise in prostitution in Ukraine were unfounded, stating that the 'media consistently work with unverified figures relating to prostitution in Ukraine, which they have taken from FEMEN press releases' (Schuster, Sülzle & Zimowska, 2010: 9).

also be seen in the image created by FEMEN at the time which called for the event to go ahead 'without prostitution' (See Figure 3. 1). As a group, FEMEN have suggested that the pervasiveness of the Sex Industry in Ukraine has meant that women's safety in the country was compromised, because of the way in which they were viewed. As Shevchenko argued, as a woman '[y]ou're a piece of meat, and men think they can do whatever to you, touch you' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

These commercial spaces, which intended to 'sell' the Championship to the public in these various cities, were subsequently associated with the 'selling' of women's bodies through its connection to the sex industry. Within the protest carried out by FEMEN however, these spaces were disrupted and an alternative dialogue introduced, which draws attention to the way in which women's bodies were also entangled within the commercialisation of the championship.



Figure 3.1 Images produced for FEMEN's Euro 2012 protests in Ukraine

Even the trophy itself is created anew in the brief moments FEMEN were able to seize it from its plinth, suddenly celebrating a small 'victory' of another kind. In doing so, FEMEN conflated the spaces 'officially' associated with the Euro 2012 Championship, in an attempt to highlight the otherwise 'unofficial' concerns regarding the increase in sex tourism in



Ukraine brought about by the competition. FEMEN's protests attempt to challenge the acceptance of the sex industry in Ukraine, repeatedly highlighting the issue at such a time and in such a place that it becomes recognised internationally.

As such, the spaces generated through FEMEN's protest can be articulated as a form of thirdspace, understood as both private and public and something else entirely, '[s]imultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...)' (Soja, 1996: 11). The protest action, therefore is not simply a presentation or representation of a fleeting moment, a 'third' possibility, but rather a spatial 'invitation' which is itself intended to invite further disruption, interjection and reconstruction of spatial understandings and binaries (Soja, 1996: 5).

#### PROTESTING AT THE MARGINS

Soja extends his articulation of thirding as a critical spatial process, through bell hook's concept of 'marginality', of strategically occupying the 'margins [...] real-and imagined' as sites of resistance (Soja, 1996: 65). In her articulation of marginality as a site of resistance, hooks quotes Pratibha Parma who states that the 'appropriation and use of space are political acts' (1996: 55). Specifically, hooks outlines a 'distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that *marginality one chooses as a site of resistance* – a location of radical openness and possibility' (hooks, 1996, 55, emphasis added).

For instance, within the material space of the protests undertaken by FEMEN at the World Economic Forum (2012 and 2013) as discussed in the previous chapter, the activists had been physically restricted to the literal peripheries of the event. However, FEMEN's

protest at the margins, tentatively mimics the omission (or significant lack of) of female attendees from the 'officially' invited delegates.

As suggested by hooks, these 'margins' can be 'interrupted, appropriated, and transformed' into spaces of possibility through the active occupation, or 'choosing' of these spaces (hooks, 1996: 54). FEMEN's return to the gates of the event a second time the following year, indicates a deliberate choice to reoccupy the margins through protest. Thus, FEMEN have established the physical margins of the World Economic Forum in 2012 and 2013 their own continued site of imagined resistance. In doing so, the formal boundaries of the WEF are reinforced and made explicit, emphasising the reality of the overtly 'private' borders at an apparently self-disclosed 'public-private' forum (World Economic Forum, 2017: online).

#### THE BODY AND BORDERS

Soja connects the exploration of spatial processes of control and disruption with that of the body, the latter outlined as 'the most intimate of personal-and-political-spaces, an affective microcosm for all other spatialities' (Soja, 1996: 112). In doing so, he draws from Barbara Hooper who argues that the body itself is perhaps the 'most critical site to watch the production and reproduction of power'<sup>20</sup> (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 114). Within her analysis of the body and power, Hooper 'acts spatially to disorder the (b)orderlands of bodies, cities [and] texts', stating that the '[b]ody and the body politic [...] are intimately linked productions' (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 114). Thus, Hooper contends that the body is a 'persistent [subject] of [...] an imaginary obsessed with the fear of unruly and dangerous

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<sup>20</sup> In his book, Soja quotes Barbara Hooper's unpublished manuscript *Bodies, Cities, Texts: The Case of Citizen Rodney King* (1994). However, the quotes here are taken from Soja's text, as I was unable to locate a published version of the original source, despite research.

elements and the equally obsessive desire to bring them under control' (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 114).

In their use of forms of female spectacle in protest, as discussed in Chapter One, FEMEN embody the figure of the '[u]nruly woman' as it is described by Russo (1994: 14). For instance, the responses regarding FEMEN's use of toplessness which deems them contradictory and grotesque in relation to normal behaviour and appearance for women, reveal a certain 'fear of [the] unruly and dangerous' that Hooper describes (1996: 114). With regards to FEMEN's protest in Belarus (2011), it also revealed a very violent and palpable 'desire to bring them under control' in their subsequent abduction and intimidation as discussed in Chapter One.

Furthermore, Hooper argues that bringing these 'unruly elements' under control is realised through 'spatial practice[s] of enclosing [them] within carefully guarded spaces' (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 115). In particular, she contends that 'in times of social crisis [...] [t]he instability of the borders heightens and concern with either their transgression or maintenance is magnified' (Hooper in Soja, 1996). FEMEN's responses to 'social crisis' are clear in their latest actions, such as their action at the waxwork museum in response to Donald Trump winning the US election in 2016, actions against the French far-right presidential candidate Marine le Pen, whose rally they interrupted by running onstage in April 2017. In both these instances, the fear and concern surrounding literal border control and immigration has dominated the political campaigns of Trump and Le Pen, with the former promising to build a physical wall on the US-Mexican border. As Hooper contends,

[w]hen borders are crossed, diluted, contested, and so become a threat to order, hegemonic power acts to reinforce them: the boundaries around territory, nation, ethnicity, race, gender, sex, class, erotic practice, are trotted out and vigorously disciplined. (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 115).

These instances of spatial control and coercion in turn construct their own binary categorisation, reinforcing the boundaries between them and embracing the 'categorical closures implicit in the either/or logic' and understandings (Soja, 1996: 7). In light of this, Hooper contends that 'counter-hegemons are working to harness disorder [...] for political use' (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 115). She states that in these instances, 'bodies, cities and texts become key sites of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic contestations' (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 115). As such, critical spatial processes such as thirding are not limited to the analysis of FEMEN's relationship to and use to space, but can be examined in relation to the space of the body, and the effects this may have on understandings of the topless female body in protest.

'MY BODY IS SEXUAL WHEN I DECIDE, IT IS POLITICAL WHEN I DECIDE!'<sup>21</sup>

By employing action as a means of examining and expanding the spatiality of FEMEN's protests, we can contend that through the processes of thirding, the group have challenged the binary understanding of protest being located solely in the material realm. Rather, the *action* can be argued to be formed of and located within the spaces of appearance, which is not limited to *either* the material or mental realm. At the same time, this process is not intended to simply produce a space formed of an 'additive combination of [the] binary antecedents' (for instance a combination of the mediated documentation and the physical protest) but may instead produce something which can be understood as 'both/and also' something possibly entirely new. In this instance, it is FEMEN's specifically

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<sup>21</sup> Quote taken from Shevchenko, Inna (2017) 'My Body is Sexual When I Decide and Politics When I Decide', FEMEN.org, <https://femen.org/my-body-is-sexual-when-i-decide-and-politics-when-i-decide/>

topless bodies which are working to 'harness disorder' through protest actions in order to disrupt a system of coercion and control which regulates the female body to binary modes of understanding and meaning (Hooper in Soja, 1996: 115).

As examined in Chapter One, FEMEN's use of the topless female body in protest drew accusations of contradiction and hypocrisy. Critics such as O'Keefe suggested that FEMEN's use of a body typically understood as sexualised, which embraced 'heteronormative, hegemonically masculine ideals of women and sexuality' could not thus be understood as political (O'Keefe, 2014: online). In these instances, toplessness has been employed as a means of dismissing their ability, or right to be political. Subsequently for many critics of the group, FEMEN's use of toplessness sits uneasily between two apparently contradictory categories: political and sexual.

The topless female body can be argued to take up an already ambiguous position within public space, as highlighted within the confusion surrounding the legality or illegality of toplessness in protest in the UK. The law also fails to specifically mention breasts and thus leaves this open to interpretation. However, understandings and sensibilities towards female toplessness differ significantly in Europe, in particular, French views on toplessness contrast with those in the UK and have done for a long time. For many topless sunbathing is stereotypically associated with European beaches (not including the UK), and according to journalist Angelique Chrisafis, '[f]or decades, France has prided itself on being the world capital of seaside semi-nudity' (Chrisafis, 2009: online).

According to the Sexual Offence Act 2003: Exposure, 'a person commits an offence if – (a) he intentionally exposes his genitals, and (b) he intends that someone will see them and be caused alarm or distress' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016: online). The latter must

be proved by the complainant (Brown, 2015: online). With regards to public protest, under the Public Order Act 1989, protest itself may '[become] criminalised' if it becomes 'threatening, abusive, or insulting' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016: online). However, the Crown Prosecution Service states that 'legitimate protest can be offensive at least to some' and as such, taking 'offensive' to a protest action (for instance if the protest involved toplessness) would not be enough to prosecute in the UK (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016: online).

The topless female body in public space is only specifically mentioned, and thus protected legally in the UK whilst breastfeeding, 'with discrimination against mothers outlawed by the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Act in 2005 and the Equality Act 2010 in England and Wales' (Phipps, 2014: 109). These formal protections are not extended to the topless female body outside of the realm of breastfeeding; whilst it is not officially illegal for women to occupy public space topless, whether protesting or not, the legislation surrounding 'indecent exposure' is still fairly vague, but relies mainly on the intent of the accused.<sup>22</sup> Having said this, FEMEN have repeatedly been accused of 'sexual exhibition' as a result of protesting topless (Shevchenko, 2017: online). At the time of writing, a recent article by Shevchenko argues that as

the sexual exhibition [in France] is not defined in the law, this leaves the prosecutor a blind spot to use against FEMEN activists. Any type of nudity can be considered a

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<sup>22</sup> This is echoed by the restrictions in place on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram, as both restrict the ability for users to post images of female toplessness. Facebook's 'Community Standards' state that they 'restrict some images of female breasts if they include the nipple, but will always allow photos of women actively engaged in breastfeeding or showing breasts with post-mastectomy scarring' (Facebook, 2016: online). Instagram also does not 'allow nudity' on its platform; this 'includes some photos of female nipples', whilst images of breastfeeding and post-mastectomy scarring are again allowed (Instagram, 2016: online).

“sexual exhibition”, which encompasses any nudity whose purpose is sexual satisfaction. (Shevchenko, 2017: online)

Within this understanding the topless female body is still understood as indecent within public space, even when they are protesting in countries such as France, who are more open to instances of female toplessness.

Soja contends, the process of ‘thirding’ can be understood as the interjection of another set of choices within binary modes of understanding space, which ‘speaks and critiques through its otherness’ (Soja, 1996: 61). As Soja is writing from a postmodern perspective, ‘thirding’ reveals a scepticism of simple binary oppositions (such as good/bad or strong/weak’) which categorise using an either/or logic. Postmodernism can be understood as a reaction to modernism, in that modernism is said to hold an ‘assumption of universality’ or absolute truths, whereas, put simply, postmodernism ‘just is the collapse of universals’ (Melville, 2004: 83). Thus, Soja suggests that thirding functions as a means of ‘resisting binary closures’ that intends to transform ‘the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of *both/and also*’ (1996: 65, emphasis added).

FEMEN’s embodiment of contradiction through their toplessness, can be seen as a means of resisting the ‘binary closures’ which surround the female body, particularly when that body is naked or partially naked. Soja contends that instances of critical thirding may subsequently produce ‘ruptures, deviation, and discontinuities [which] can be politically transformed from liability and weakness to [a] potential source of opportunity and strength’ (Soja, 1996: 117). As mentioned briefly in the previous chapters, FEMEN were taken to court but eventually acquitted of charges of ‘sexual exhibition’ after their protest against the former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn in Lille, France in

February 2015. Within this protest, FEMEN's toplessness can be considered in part a source of 'liability and weakness' as the group faced charges connected directly to the use of and understandings of the topless female body as implicitly sexual. However, the group were acquitted of these charges, seemingly after their toplessness was considered within the context of a 'political demonstration' and as a 'mode of expression' (Agence France-Presse, 2016: online).

In this instance, FEMEN can be argued to produce a form of politicised toplessness which embodies the 'ruptures, deviation, and discontinuities' that Soja describes. In doing so, FEMEN's acquittal suggests that the binary understanding and categorisation of the female body have been somewhat 'politically transformed', or at least confronted, through this protest (Soja, 1996: 117). This can also be observed through the group's use of the toplessness within the Paris Fashion Week protest in 2013.

As suggested in Chapter One, women have been traditionally associated with the confines of the body through its own 'beautification' (1993: 17), which Bordo contends produces a 'gendered nature of mind/body dualism' (1993: 14). Within this dualism, the male is positioned as the 'active, striving conscious subject' associated with the mind, thus with the 'woman cast in the role of the body' (Bordo, 1993: 5). This resonates with Gorman's contention cited in Chapter One that 'female identity' is often inextricably associated with the body (2013: 49).

Nowhere is this perhaps more keenly felt than within the material and mental realms of fashion week and the fashion industry as a whole. Within this industry, the female body is repeatedly dressed and constructed according to hegemonic ideals of female appearance and subsequently exhibited and documented, in a process which inexorably confines



women to their bodies. FEMEN's topless protest in this context, whilst disrupting the literal space of the catwalk, attempts to act as a form of 'intrusive disruption' within the dualism highlighted by Bordo (Soja, 1996: 61).

However, FEMEN's use of female toplessness (and their emphasis on the body in protest) does not dismiss the body within this dualism. As suggested in Chapter One, FEMEN's notion of 'womanhood' is categorically connected to the body, but their use of toplessness is employed in order to attempt to alter the ways in which is understood and constructed, thus regaining agency and control over its use. In doing so, FEMEN's use of toplessness in this way (in that they embody and challenge the tensions at play within the body) arguably produces a 'dialectically open logic of both/and also' of the female body, through the interjection of another option (1996: 65).

Thus, the form of toplessness generated by FEMEN is not simply 'additive combination' or dismissal of the 'binary antecedents' which are connected to the female body. Neither does it fluctuate between these categories and understandings of the topless female body, but attempts to draw 'selectively and strategically from [them] to open new alternatives' (Soja, 1996: 5). As such, FEMEN's toplessness exists in contradiction and multiplicity, moving beyond each category to become something potentially new and resistant, a form of politicised toplessness. Having said this, FEMEN are of course not the only example of toplessness employed in protest and with each use of toplessness as a strategy, the outcomes and understandings vary according to different contexts.

On 4th October 2016, students at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand went topless during protests against the cost of rising student fees (Sim, 2016). Their decision to do so, 'immediately changed the tone of the protests by defiantly persuading

police to cease fire on students' (Vallabhjee, 2016). In this instance, toplessness in protest became a strategic moment of vulnerability in the face of potential violence.

Another example can be found within the Instagram account 'Genderless\_Nipples' (Instagram, 2016: online). This account has, since December 2016, posted close-up photographs of human nipples; images which are specifically designed to not reveal the gender of the nipples 'owner'. In doing so, this account aims to challenge the 'Community Guidelines' in place on Instagram which, systematically removes images containing female nipples which are deemed to be 'in violation' of said guidelines, whilst it does not do so for male nipples. By presenting these singular nipples with no easily discernible gender attached to them, this account examines exactly how disarming ambiguity can be. It effectively challenges a rule which consigns the female nipple to an inherently sexualised position, which is so easily thrown into disarray when the gender of the owner is not readily revealed. Like FEMEN, this account draws from the 'both/and also' logic, emphasising that the binary distinctions made between the categories of male and female, are not inherently knowable or concrete, and presents an alternative way of understanding (and looking at) a small but highly contested part of the female body.

These examples underscore female toplessness as a possible means of resistance in protest. In doing so, they provide a means of challenging the 'closed logic of either/or' with regards to the female body, through the interjection of another 'disruptive' option (Soja, 1996: 61). For FEMEN, their use of female toplessness as protest is directly connected to questions of agency and resistance. As Shevchenko has contended, 'my body is sexual when I decide, it is political when I decide' (Shevchenko, 2017: online). Their repeated use of the topless female body, despite its potential 'liability' suggests that the group insist of their

right to politicise this body, to claim agency over their own toplessness and the ways in which it is understood.

Thus, as the protests carried out by FEMEN can be understood as forms of action, there exists a potential for newness, for natality as Arendt suggests. As discussed briefly in Chapter Two, action as it is outlined by Arendt is characterised by an 'inherent unpredictability' (1998: 191). As such, the outcomes or understandings of the body produce through FEMEN's protest actions are themselves potentially boundless, and may thus generate readings of the body and their actions that are not intended by the group. Not only this, but reading the body through its documentation, particularly that which is not produced or controlled by FEMEN themselves, can alter the way protest actions are presented and understood. This is particularly evident when considering notions of spectacular culture outlined by Guy Debord (1967) and the commodification of the female body within the mass media.

#### SPECTACULAR CULTURE, MEDIATISATION AND AWARENESS

As mentioned briefly in Chapter One, Debord argues that spectacle can be understood as a 'worldview transformed into an objective force' (1995: 12). In doing so, he contends that spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life' which dictate and controls the 'total practice of one particular economic and social formation' (1995:13). This formation is, at the same time, the 'historical moment by which we happen to be governed' and thus its prevalence in society emphasises a 'choice already made in the sphere of production' by those governing forces (Debord, 1995: 13). Spectacular culture, therefore, does not require a justification of its own, as it has already been developed as the dominant mode of production and reproduction.

Within this description, Debord positions the mass media as the 'stultifying superficial manifestation' of that which he terms 'spectacular culture' (Debord, 1995: 22). FEMEN's dramaturgical strategies of protest which, in part, aim to ensure media attention and coverage, has meant that their protest aligns with the spectacular culture that Debord describes, as is thus readily incorporated and relayed within this context. As Debord contends, within spectacular culture 'all activity [has been effectively] banned' and rather, 'has been forcibly channelled into the global construction of the spectacle' (Debord, 1995: 21-23).

FEMEN have professed an 'openness and commitment' to the mass media, in order 'to ensure maximum coverage of [their] revolutionary and advocacy activities' (FEMEN, 2016). Thus far, this 'openness' has manifested itself partly in their use of toplessness in protest, which ensures FEMEN garner a significant amount of mainstream media coverage. Whilst FEMEN have always contended that their use of female toplessness in protest was not employed solely to attract media attention, their topless strategies have been shaped and developed through their interaction with the media and the subsequent responses by said media.

As FEMEN have hoped to reach larger and more widespread audiences through the mass media, these strategies must inevitably engage with the action through a mediated form, the content of which may occur and be framed within spectacular culture. Thus, the political and socially resistant images and ideas that FEMEN might produce are potentially subsumed by the spectacular culture that Debord describes, which subsequently commodifies them. FEMEN do appear to recognise that their use of toplessness leaves them open to sexualisation and misrepresentation within the media, however, it is justified by

Shevchenko, who states when not protesting topless '[FEMEN] were talking about much more important topics, but they were just ignored' (Schevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online).

In 'The Art of Activism' (2015), Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert examine the connections between understandings of generating 'change' and creating 'awareness' within different forms of activism. In doing so, they state that a 'fairly common approach among activists' is to equate raising awareness with generating 'change' (2015: 26). Within FEMEN's dramaturgical strategy, the group have stated their use of female toplessness has been a method of ensuring their protest actions gathered significant media attention and coverage, thus ensuring awareness for their various causes (Cochrane, 2013). As such, FEMEN contend that their topless strategies are essential to their self-professed 'aggressive awareness raising [...] campaign' (FEMEN, 2015). In doing so, FEMEN have thus equated generating media coverage with raising awareness and thus, supposedly, creating 'change'. However, though Duncombe and Lambert argue that theoretically this may 'make sense when you understand cultural change as being rooted in enlightenment and rationality', they do not believe this approach alone will inherently generate political or social change (2015: 26).

Thomas and Stehling (2016) discuss the 'mediatized strategies' and protest practices employed by FEMEN, specifically focusing on the ways in which these have been understood and interpreted within the German media. They note a marked shift in mediatised understandings of FEMEN as a 'Ukrainian group to [...] a global organisation' (2016: 92). They argue that this shift in geographical framing has led to a 'decontextualisation and depolitization of FEMEN's activism in public spheres' (2016: 91) and that much of the criticisms surrounding FEMEN within the media arose once the group began protesting

internationally, regarding issues disassociated with Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Most significantly, these include FEMEN's protests against female veiling practices and Islam, which the group dubbed 'topless jihad' (Tayler, 2013: online). Thomas and Stehling state that, '[t]his move towards addressing non-Ukrainian issues and audiences can be described as transculturalization, which contributed to the interpretation of FEMEN as detached from local contexts' (2016: 92).

With regards to FEMEN, critics have also contended that their use of the topless female body in protest has been designed to do little more than 'capture the attention of the mainstream media' (O'Keefe, 2014). However, during the last two years it seems that the media attentions afforded to the group have begun to wane, at least online within British newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*.

Based on a search for 'FEMEN' on the website of the British online newspaper *The Independent*, the results revealed that in 2012 and 2011 when the group began generating media attention in the UK, with the number of articles reaching 3 and 1 respectively. This is compared to a total of 7 articles in 2014. These numbers drop to a total of two articles in 2016, and again in 2015, within which FEMEN are either the sole focus of discussion or in which the group are mentioned (See Figure 3.2).

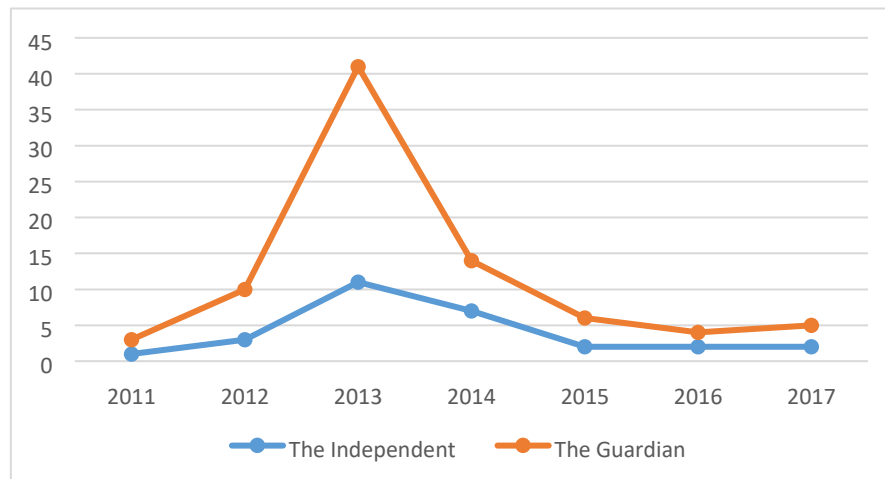


Figure 3.2 Comparison of media articles based on FEMEN within *The Independent* and *The Guardian*

Conducting a similar examination of the British newspaper *The Guardian* through their website, this site actually has its own ‘feed’ specifically collating the ‘latest news and comment’ surrounding FEMEN. In this instance, 2016 and 2015 reveal a total of 2 and 4 articles about or mentioning the group. This is compared to a grand total of 7 articles in 2014 and 30 in 2013. In both instances, there seems to be a small spike in media coverage of the group by these two sources in 2013, whereas the number of articles in the last two years, between 2015 and 2016, shows a decrease based on these two British media sources and their online content.

In these instances, the coverage from *The Guardian* and *The Independent* have decreased despite the number of actions carried out by the group increasing since 2013. Based on the ‘News’ articles posted onto FEMEN’s official website (FEMEN.org) during 2016, the group and their various international factions carried out roughly 15 actions in countries

such as France, USA, Germany and Canada (FEMEN, 2016). This is compared to roughly 11 protest actions undertaken in the year of 2013<sup>23</sup>.

This comparison is obviously not exhaustive. As there exists no official source which lists the dates and locations for all of FEMEN's actions thus far, there remains a margin for error with regards to the numbers outlined above. Due to the nature of the group, their apparent multiple factions and locations<sup>24</sup>, information regarding their actions appear (and disappear) throughout the World Wide Web, within media sources held to their own biases and agendas. Despite this it seems that, whilst the number of actions have roughly remained the same, in these instances the British media attention afforded the group has begun to decrease over the last two years.

However, given the results of the 2016 US Presidential election, amongst worries that the new administration 'will set back women's right by decades', Barbara Brownie suggests that the 'naked protest may have regained relevance' (Brownie, 2016: online). At the time, FEMEN were among those protesting the US election through the use of partial nudity, after protesting topless at a Manhattan polling station during the 2017 US Presidential election.

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<sup>23</sup> These figures were sourced online from British Newspapers including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sun* and *Gettyimages.com* in order to procure dates and locations. With regards to 2013, I was unable to use FEMEN's official website as their 'News' feed returned only so far as 2015. Their previous website, *FEMEN.com*, and its contents were removed during early 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Currently, FEMEN state that they are 'represented by national branches all over Europe' and 'is managed by the Coordination Council which includes the founders and the most prominent members' (FEMEN, 2016: online). However, this is the only mention of FEMEN's 'Coordination Council' thus far, and there exists sparse information regarding their national branches, apart from their French headquarters (FEMEN, 2016: online)



## CONCLUSION

FEMEN's use of female toplessness in protest has long since become synonymous with the group. It has been established as standard practice among its activists, and at the time of writing, there are no signs that this will change in the near future. Having said this, it is clear that FEMEN's own sense of political impact is, at least in part, located in their continued ability to establish media coverage for their protests and 'causes' (Cochrane, 2013: online). Thus, if FEMEN's topless protest form is no longer generating the media attention it once was, as suggested in Chapter Three, it may mean that FEMEN's strategies are no longer effective in doing what they were originally intended to do. Furthermore, this would imply that FEMEN are subsequently failing to 'appear' in ways they once were, and as such the potential longevity and spatiality of FEMEN's actions are altered.

Not only this, but FEMEN's protest can be argued to be constructed according to Debord's characterisation of 'spectacular culture', particularly in relation to their engagement with the mass media. On one hand, it may be that the ability for the potential spaces of appearance to be generated and maintained through action, will be determined by their ability to stay relevant to this spectacular 'world view' outlined by Debord, wherein FEMEN's own spectacles have seemingly become mundane or at least no longer newsworthy.

FEMEN have become a complicated subject matter, in part, because they are still currently active, in the sense that they are still protesting and understandings of the group, within academia and the media, shift often. New protests are being steadily undertaken by the group and the critical discussion surrounding them, such as those included in the

*Women's Studies in Communication* special issue (2015), are constantly developing. Within the examples examined throughout this thesis, which have taken place in the US, France, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland, it is clear that FEMEN are well travelled. Alongside the literal geographical shift in location, the framework at the given moment of protest shifts too: from the catwalk, to football championships, and waxwork museums. As the cultural, political and social context of their actions are constantly changing, FEMEN present a specific difficulty when considering issues surrounding their political efficacy, or their position as a feminist protest group.

With regards to FEMEN's protest at Paris Fashion Week (2013), journalist Julie Gerstein contends that 'What do FEMEN's topless protests really accomplish? Once the pair of protesters was removed, Nina Ricci's show went on, after all' (Gerstein, 2013: online). This statement suggests that FEMEN's political efficacy lies in their ability to disrupt fashion week, or the fashion industry as a whole. If this did not occur, FEMEN's apparent aim for the protest was not met, the protest was a failure.

The title of this thesis, 'our mission is protest', is taken from FEMEN's protest manifesto. As suggested in Chapter Two, this mission statement evokes Arendt's notion of action, which is not the means to an end, but simply '[t]o act [...] to set something in motion' (Arendt, 1998: 177). Not only this, but it can also be located in their ability to maintain the protest action, to extend the spatiality and longevity of protest.

The spaces that may be generated (or magnified) through protest, according to Arendt, are 'unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands [...] does not survive on the actuality of the movement which brought it into being' (1998: 199). Whilst FEMEN are repeatedly protesting, the spaces of appearance that may be generated as a result of these

protests do not rely on the physical act to maintain them. Rather, Arendt suggests that these spaces may disappear, 'not only with the dispersal of men [...] but with the disappearance [...] of the activities themselves' (1998: 199).

As suggested in Chapter Two, by considering FEMEN's protest as forms of action, it can be argued that this type of space described by Arendt is maintained by FEMEN through the ways in which the group and their protests subsequently 'appear' after the initial protest has ended. In this sense, the protest, or the 'activities', have not disappeared after the 'dispersal' of the protesters, but is rather sustained through the continued 'appearance' and 'reappearance' of the activity. As discussed throughout this thesis, FEMEN's dramaturgical strategies, their use of female toplessness and relationship to space, are partly intended to generate media attention, to keep people talking. Thus, the strategies employed by FEMEN are arguably effective at maintaining 'action' through the 'appearances' of the protest. In this sense, their protests can be considered effective.

Besides from protest itself, FEMEN also state their aim to regain agency of the female body through their performance of a politicised toplessness, in order to generate 'new interpretation[s] of nudity' (Shevchenko in Cochrane, 2013: online). The ability to do so, is in part a result of their use and relationship to space in protest and the political ramifications which stem from this. Through theories of 'action' attributed to Arendt, FEMEN can be said to generate forms of public space within the private, drawing on both the 'firstspace[s]' of the 'physical' locations of these actions and the 'secondspace[s]' of representation (Soja, 1996). In doing so, they have not only combined these spaces of action and representation, but created a space that draws from and subsequently 'extends [...]

beyond' these in their ability to produce meaningful instances of conflict and contradiction (Soja, 1996: 11).

Significantly, in relation to FEMEN's protests, this space is located within the space of the body. As suggested in Chapter Two, FEMEN are not simply joining the liminal spaces of protest, but producing them via the body through their use and performance of the carnivalesque, as characterised by Russo. In theory, by characterising FEMEN's protest as action, FEMEN can be argued to have carved out an alternate space, which is also located within the space of the body, for potentially new and disruptive readings of the female body in protest.

As such, the processes of 'thirling' outlined by Soja, have provided a useful framework for drawing out and analysing the readings and contradictions at play within FEMEN's use of topless female body. Furthermore, if we consider spectacular culture as a 'world view transformed into objective force' (Debord, 1995: 13), FEMEN's production of a form of disruptive and contradictory female spectacle in protest can be argued to interject another option within this world view that Debord describes, rather than being subsumed by it.

Whilst there exists significant criticisms surrounding FEMEN's position as a feminist protest group, as discussed briefly in the introduction, it can be argued that FEMEN can be considered feminist, in that they have continually 'acted' to highlight issues pertaining to the social, economic and political inequality of the sexes. In the same way, FEMEN are political, as we understand this in Arendtian terms. Action is not primarily concerned with achieving a certain 'goal', rather it is essentially about *doing politics*. The notion of determining whether

FEMEN are a successful protest group in relation to what they achieve (or don't) becomes politically unimportant.

Arendt's notion of politics can be thus understood as the process of *new things provoked*, which are at the time not necessarily deemed to be 'good' or 'bad', but which set something in motion through action. Due to the inherent boundlessness of action itself, as discussed in Chapter Two, FEMEN's use of the female body in protest might produce outcomes which may not be what they had initially intended. Furthermore, whilst the spaces generated through action may be understood as imbued with a certain potential, or boundlessness, wherein the binarisms surrounding the body and space may be challenged, these outcomes are not guaranteed. As Russo contends, the processes of the carnival and risk in relation to the female body, 'points more to possibility than to sustained progress' (1994: 13). As such, FEMEN's future lies in their ability to respond to and develop their activities according to the outcomes they produce, in ways the group seemingly do not yet do.

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Figure 1.2 FEMEN and Galia Ackerman (2014) *FEMEN*, Cambridge: Polity Press, [https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Femen.html?id=8aAFnwEACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Femen.html?id=8aAFnwEACAAJ&redir_esc=y), Accessed 9 October 2017

### CHAPTER ONE:

Figure 2.1 Surcinema (2011) 'Femen stage Anti-KGB Protest in Belarus Kidnapped & Tortured, Terrorised & Stripped Naked', *YouTube.com*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_SybaVMpnA&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_SybaVMpnA&has_verified=1), Accessed 9 October 2017

Figure 2.2 Stinson, Nicole (2017) 'Topless protester grabs 'Donald Trump by the balls' ahead of Inauguration Day', *Dailystar.co.uk*, <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latestnews/579532/topless-woman-grabs-Donald-Trump-balls-crotch-protestInauguration-Day>, Accessed 9 October 2017

Figure 2.3 Canada.com (2013) 'FEMEN crashes Paris Fashion Week', *Canada.com*, <http://o.canada.com/photos/femen-crashes-paris-fashion-week#paris-fashion-ricci4>, Accessed 9 October 2017

Figure 2.4 and 2.5 Phelan, Hayley (2013), 'Topless protestors crash Nina Ricci show', *Fashionista.com*, <http://fashionista.com/2013/09/topless-protestors-crash-ninaricci-show>. Accessed 23 August 2015.

### CHAPTER THREE:

Figure 3.1 Yurchuk, Yuliya (2012) 'Football Against Sex Tourism and Prostitution?', *Balticworlds.com*, <http://balticworlds.com/football-against-sex-tourism-andprostitution/>, Accessed 9 October 2017

## APPENDIX

DUNGAY, LEAH (2016) 'THAT B\*\*\*\* RUINED MY WALK': FEMEN, FASHION WEEK AND FEMALE SPECTACLE, JAWS: JOURNAL OF ARTS WRITING BY STUDENTS, VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1, PP. 19 -27

In September 2013, two topless female protesters arrived at Paris Fashion Week, found a way into the Nina Ricci Spring/Summer '14 show and abruptly joined the models on the catwalk. These women faced countless photographers, video cameras and journalists before being taken away by security. This article will critically analyse this action by the contemporary feminist protest group FEMEN, focusing on their use of 'female spectacle' and the group's complex relationship with the mass media and 'spectacular culture'.

This article will consider the ways in which practises of risk, stunting and female spectacle are employed by FEMEN within their topless protest form in order to undermine the dominant hegemonic constructions of female identity. Thus, it will also examine criticisms surrounding FEMEN's problematic use of the gendered/sexualised female body in protest. This article will explore the content and focus of the subsequent media representation of the Fashion Week protest in order to examine FEMEN's belief in representational visibility as a form of political power.

**Keywords:** FEMEN, protest, female spectacle, stunting, feminism, media

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Appendix. Dungay, Leah (2016) 'That B\*\*\*\*\* Ruined My Walk': FEMEN, Fashion Week and Female Spectacle, JAWS: Journal of Arts Writing by Students, Volume 2, Issue 1, PP. 19 – 27  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1386/jaws.2.1.19\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jaws.2.1.19_1)

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